

# ***1. The nature of the act of supplication***

Gould distinguishes two different types of acts of Greek supplication, according to the action involved. One is the supplication of an individual (or god) in person, the other is the appeal to a god (or, indirectly, those who worship that god) through contact with an altar, or other sacred place.<sup>1</sup>

## **Supplication face-to-face**

Supplication of a person face to face involved certain distinct actions. One was the grasping of the knees of the person supplicated, as is done by the daughter of Hegetorides of Kos, when she begs Pausanias to save her from slavery after the battle of Plataia (Herodotus 9.76.1-2). Helen supplicates Menelaos by his knees, after the fall of Troy (Euripides, Daughters of Troy 1042-43). The clasping of knees appears to be an extremely important component of supplication. This is, of course, reflected in the language chosen. γούνων λαμβάνω (grasp the knees) is clearly intended as a synonym for supplication (e.g. Kirke's supplication of Odysseus, when she runs under his drawn sword and clutches his knees - Odyssey 10.323), as is γούνων λιτανεύω (e.g. when Odysseus entreats Kirke by her knees - ibid., 10.481) and γούναθ' αἶρέω (e.g. Odysseus' supposed supplication of the Egyptian king - ibid., 14.279). Homer also utilises γούναθ' ἱκάνω (come to the knees, e.g. Odysseus' supplication of the Kyklops - ibid., 9.266-67), γούνων ἄπτουμαι (e.g. Trojans' unavailing attempt to cling to the knees of Akhilleus - Iliad 20.468), and even more explicitly, γούνασι χεῖρας βάλλω (place arms around the knees), in reference to Odysseus' supplication of Arete (Odyssey 6.310-11; 7.142). γουνάζομαι (clasp knees) is also used - literally in Leodes' supplication of Odysseus

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<sup>1</sup> John Gould, "Hiketeia", Journal of Hellenic Studies XCIII (1973), pp. 75-77

(ibid., 22.312) - when it is explicitly stated that he has clasped the king's knees (ibid., 22.310). However, it can be used figuratively, when clearly the suppliant does not touch the knees, as when Odysseus supplicates Nausikaa, staying a cautious distance from her (ibid., 6.149). Just as obviously distant from the knees of Agamemnon are the two sons of Antimakhos, when they supplicate (γουνάζεσθην) the king from their chariot (Iliad 11.130). It is not clear whether Odysseus is clasping Athene's knees when he uses the same verb (Odyssey 13.324), but one assumes it to be unlikely. Probably one is to understand that Hektor is clasping the knees of Akhilleus when the latter refuses the dying man's supplication (Iliad 22.345), but the meaning remains somewhat ambiguous. However, the clasping of the knees has become so assimilated into the idea of supplication that the verb or phrase may be used metaphorically.

There is a certain ambiguity in the use of γουνάζομαι; does it mean "clasp the knees of another" or "kneel"? In his pleas to Nausikaa, Odysseus could intend either meaning; it is stated clearly that he decides not to take hold of her knees, but to stay some distance from the young woman. Maybe the verb he uses describes his kneeling posture; maybe by selecting this verb he seeks to supply in words what he does not dare through gesture. That ambiguity is preserved in Odysseus' encounter with Athene: would he dare clasp the knees of the goddess, even by inference? On the other hand, one may infer that the use of γουνάζομαι in the supplication of Agamemnon by the sons of Antimakhos makes a verbal suggestion of their gripping Agamemnon's knees in supplication; to kneel in an out-of-control chariot being dragged by ὠκέας ἵππους (swift horses - ibid., 11.127-28) would seem a risky manoeuvre. More convincing is the use of the same word by Lykaon when he supplicates Akhilleus (ibid., 21.74). Not only does he declare himself a suppliant (ibid., 21.75), but he also winds his hands around

Akhilleus' knees (ibid., 21.71). On balance, γουνάζουμαι is probably more likely to refer to the knees of the supplicated, to which suppliants appeal (if not attach themselves), rather than to the suppliants' own knees, on which they (probably) kneel. The evidence is, however, tantalisingly inconclusive.<sup>2</sup>

It is not only the knees that are clutched. The action may be combined with other gestures. Thetis touches Zeus under the chin with her right hand while grasping his knees with her left (ibid., 1.500-01)<sup>3</sup> (and kissing them? ibid., 8.370-72).<sup>4</sup> Amphitryon bows before his son Herakles, and supplicates him ἀμφὶ γενειάδα καὶ γόνυ καὶ χεῖρα (by your beard and knee and hand - Euripides, Herakles 1207-08); Hekabe uses the same images when she supplicates her conqueror (Euripides, Hekabe 752-23). Amphitryon and Hekabe grasp the hands of the individuals they are supplicating; so too do Priamos (Iliad 24.477-79), and a slave of Iokaste (Sophokles, Oidipous the King 758-63).

This action, however, is not always attested. The bound Andromakhe falls in front of the knees of Peleus, pleading that she is unable to raise her hand to his beard (Euripides, Andromakhe 572-75). Dolon too tries to reach the chin of Diomedes, but his hand is cut off before he can reach it (Iliad 10.454-56). Helen's actions when she supplicates Theoklymenos are somewhat ambiguous: while she supplicates him by his knees, with, by implication, her hands around them, he asks what she is seeking with her

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the posture of the suppliant while clutching the knees, see below, pp. 38-42.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of why these parts of the body should be so prominent in supplication ritual, see below, pp. 102-11.

<sup>4</sup> Mark W. Edwards suggests, plausibly, that the extra detail of Thetis having kissed Zeus' knees is a "malicious exaggeration" by Athene: Edwards, Homer. Poet of the Iliad (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 184.

arms outstretched (Euripides, Helen 1237-38). Maybe the required formula is considered to be contained in the words alone, rendering gestures superfluous. Both Thetis (Iliad 1.503-10, 514-16) and the daughter of Hegetorides (Herodotus 9.76.2) speak persuasively to the person supplicated. Words alone are used by Hekabe, when, far from an altar, she declares herself a suppliant before the gods, in the face of the danger to Polyxene (Euripides, Hekabe 96-97), and by Iokaste, when she asks Apollon to cleanse Thebes of the curse (Sophokles, Oidipous the King 918-21).

Pedrick sees the use of persuasive speech in the Iliad as evidence of the inherent weakness of the ritual in this poem; she argues that the Iliadic hero needs to strengthen his appeal in a variety of ways, as the gestures alone have little force.<sup>5</sup> Therefore Adrestos needs to plead with Menelaos, needs to offer ransom (Iliad 6.46-50); so too does Lykaon, when he begs Akhilleus for his life (ibid., 21.74-96). Both these men are clutching the knees of the supplicated heroes as they speak. Is this an early form of supplication, where the gestures mean little by themselves? If this were the case, one would expect later supplications to be made with the gestures alone, in silence. Yet this is not so. Medeia, suppliant at Kreon's knee, argues eloquently (Euripides, Medeia 324-47); Themistokles uses persuasive words to Admetos (Thucydides 1.136.4). Surely it is more likely that persuasive words, or other "added appeals", form part of the supplication ritual, and may not be used as evidence of the weakness of any other part of that ritual.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pedrick, op. cit., pp. 129-32

<sup>6</sup> As argues Charles Mercier, "Suppliant ritual in Euripidean tragedy" (Ph. D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1990), p. 47-48.

Physical contact, usually with knees and chin, or a verbal formula which suggests this contact, seems to be important. Csapo speculates that, prior perhaps even to the period covered by Homer, contact with not only the person supplicated, but a member of the family of that individual, was recognised.<sup>7</sup> This, he suggests, is the reason why Themistokles was advised to hold in his arms the child of the king from whom he is seeking aid: to touch the child was equivalent to touching the king.<sup>8</sup>

The clasping of the knees may be accompanied by other gestures not directly related to supplication, such as the laceration of cheeks, the eyes pouring with tears, the beating of breasts, tearing out the hair and the wearing of clothes more appropriate for mourners (Euripides, Suppliants 42-51; 71-77; 95-97). These gestures form part of the mourning ritual. According to the analysis detailed by Sourvinou-Inwood,<sup>9</sup> in heroic times the first phase of mourning, the πρόθεσις, the preparation of the body for burial, was marked by the violent expression of grief, performed by the women closest to the deceased. In this phase, the women would wail, beat their breasts, tear their necks, faces, hair and breasts, disarrange their clothes, and fling themselves onto the corpse. Sourvinou-Inwood comments that this ritual is not a spontaneous emotional outpouring, but socially prescribed behaviour, and while it provides emotional release, it is contrived for that purpose by society.<sup>10</sup> Burkert argues that the wailing, the tearing of the face, clothes and hair, and the beating of breasts is an echo of that

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<sup>7</sup> E.G. Csapo, "Hikesia in the *Telephus* of Aeschylus", Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica (n.s.) XXXIV no. 1 (1990), p. 50

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 51

<sup>9</sup> "A trauma in flux: death in the 8th century and after", in Robin Hägg (ed.), The Greek Renaissance of the Eighth Century B.C.: Tradition and Innovation. Proceedings of the Second International Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens (Stockholm: Borgströms Tryckeri AB, 1983), p. 37

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 38

violence which would be used to protect a member of the group against an aggressor. In the case of death, there is no physical force to overcome, no way that the member of the group may be protected, so the mourners turn their aggression against themselves.<sup>11</sup> So the chorus weep and tear their cheeks (*ibid.*, 76-8), wail (*ibid.*, 71), tear their hair (*ibid.*, 97), and indicate their longing to throw their arms around the bodies of their sons (*ibid.*, 68-70). These women remain in the first mourning phase because their sons as yet lie unburied. Elektra, too, not yet reconciled to the death of her father, tears her cheeks and her hair over Agamemnon's tomb (Euripides, Elektra 146-49).<sup>12</sup> The Sophoklean Elektra, also given to extravagant lamentation (Sophokles, Elektra e.g. 133, 201-12, 221-25), is very conscious that she is the only mourner for Agamemnon (100-09); his death was not mourned by

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Burkert, Homo Necans. The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth (translated by Peter Bing. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 53

<sup>12</sup> That Elektra should mourn her father so long after his burial is appropriate. The degree of her mourning is, however, excessive, and thought to be so by the chorus ("no doubt ... to rouse Electra from her brooding" - J.D. Denniston, Euripides. Electra. Edited with Introduction and Commentary [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939], p. 72 on vv. 193-97; Euripides, Elektra 196-97). However, it is dramatically necessary that she behave in this way. Also, hers is a character given to excess: it is she and not Orestes who confronts both Klytaimestra and the corpse of Aigisthos (vv. 907-56; 1060-99), she who gives way to terror while awaiting the news of Aigisthos' murder (vv. 757-59), who plots the murder of Klytaimestra (vv. 647, 651-60), who shares in that murder (vv. 1224-25), persuading Orestes (vv. 967-87) who was, in the words of the chorus, οὐ θέλοντα (v. 1205). Not until her mother is dead does her hunger for Klytaimestra's death give way to remorse for matricide; she rightly assigns the moral culpability to herself, not Apollon's oracle (vv. 1182-84). Orestes, indeed, is a cipher, open to manipulation by his more ardent sister (as Cropp noted - Euripides. Electra. With Translation and Commentary [Warminster, Wilts.: Aris & Phillips, 1988], p. xxxv). Philip Slater, discussing Euripides' Orestes, comments that the Greeks seem to have been unable to imagine how a man could defeat a woman without the help of another woman; she is the more powerful individual, he is merely her instrument (Philip E. Slater, "The Greek family in history and myth", Arethusa VII [1974], p. 32).

his family and the entire community, as would have been usual on the death of such a prominent individual, but by the outcast Elektra, alone.<sup>13</sup>

In a dreadful echo of this ritual, Hekabe anticipates (while trying to prevent) her son's death in her desperate supplication of Hektor, when she wails, weeps and disorders her clothing (Iliad 22.79-80). So, too, through the tearing of her cheeks she later anticipates her enslavement to the very man who had masterminded the capture of her city (Euripides, Daughters of Troy 278-81), and foreshadows the death of her grandson (ibid., 793-94). Elsewhere, she covers her head with dust, in mourning for her sacrificed daughter (Euripides, Hekabe 496). As Kurtz and Boardman comment,<sup>14</sup> the living become polluted through contact with the dead (though in this case the contact was figurative rather than literal), and sometimes make themselves physically unclean as an expression of their intense grief. Hermione, in the fear that her husband would learn that she had planned the death of his slave Andromakhe, tears her cheeks and her clothes (Euripides, Andromakhe 829-31, 833-35). By the time these plays were performed, such extravagant gestures in public would have been unusual, if not obsolete; in the case of Athens, they had been expressly banned by Solon

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<sup>13</sup> Among the functions of the lament, according to Sourvinou-Inwood ("Reading" Greek Death. To the End of the Classical Period [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995], pp. 177, 217-18), was the wish to express not only sorrow but involvement with the dead individual, and to emphasise, even increase, the prestige of the deceased. Therefore, for the lament (with its associated gestures of self-wounding - Sophokles, Elektra 89-91) to be discouraged or even prohibited (ibid., 378-82) is a slight on the dead man, an attempt to show him as having been of little or no account, without importance in his community. Therefore it could also be seen as inflicting a second death on him. The distress of Elektra at a double murder of this nature is understandable.

<sup>14</sup> Donna C. Kurtz and John Boardman, Greek Burial Customs (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 150

(Plutarch, Solon 21.4).<sup>15</sup> Probably they would have been seen by the audience as interesting archaisms.

The most extravagant public gesture of grieving left in the fifth century is the lament for the dead, which Thucydides claims was an essential part of mourning (Thucydides 2.51). The lament forms part of the second phase of the mourning process, the ἐκφορά, when the corpse was carried out for burial.<sup>16</sup> The function of the self-mutilation within the supplications, of course, was to underscore the despair of the characters, and to indicate the depth of the emotions of Hekabe (Iliad 22. 79-80) and the bereaved mothers (Euripides, Suppliants 42-51, 71-77, 95-97), as they directed their supplication towards those they believed could succour them. The character herself is often using these ritual gestures to manipulate people and situations to her own advantage; while her emotional outpourings may not be consciously and cynically contrived, there sometimes seems to be a certain degree of calculation involved. Also, the

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret Alexiou postulates two possible reasons for this restriction. First, she suggests that through their responsibility for the important ritual lament women had gained power in decision-making, and that this was viewed as antithetical to the power structure of the developing democracy. More plausibly, she proposes that the very public behaviour involved in the lament drew too much attention to the deceased and to the people mourning that death, and in times of feuds (such as when Solon enacted the legislation) this could be dangerous for the state (Alexiou, The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition [London: Cambridge University Press, 1974], p. 21). Sourvinou-Inwood, on the other hand, implies that Solon is recognising a change already suggested by Homer. She claims that the fact that Homer feels the need to explain why grief is expressed by people outside the immediate group affected suggests that the "assumption of grief by outsiders ... was already less of a routine aspect of the ritual and may even have begun to recede in the eighth century", because of the change from small communities where each death would have an effect on the whole community ("To die and enter the house of Hades: Homer, before and after", in Joachim Whaley [ed.], Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death [London: Europa Publications, 1981], pp. 29-30).

<sup>16</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood, "Trauma", p. 39

mourning ritual may have the function of preparing people for the exaction of revenge. Elektra and Orestes, with the chorus, indulge in a protracted lament for the dead Agamemnon (Aiskhylos, Libation Bearers 306-509). This, as Seaford argues persuasively, has the effect of creating the group solidarity and anger that is needed for revenge against Agamemnon's murderers.<sup>17</sup> So Elektra portrays herself and her brother as helpless suppliants at the tomb (ibid., 336-37); such a gesture, in this context, is charged with pity, pity for the murdered man, pity for his children, pity for their plight. According to Stanford, the English word "pity" conveys little of the "visceral" quality of the emotion of Greek tragedy. The one who pities the victim - whether it be another character in the play, or the audience - shares, in part, the pain of that victim.<sup>18</sup> The anger this wrenching pity produces certainly helps the participants concentrate on the deeds of Klytaimnestra rather than her relationship to those planning her death. Indeed, each time suppliants use parts of the mourning ritual they are attempting to harness that pity which mourners attract, in order to manipulate an individual (or individuals) to grant whatever their wish may be. On each occasion, also, there is an association with death. That death may have occurred already (such as that of Agamemnon, or of the Argives), or be anticipated (as that of Hektor). The desire either to prevent the anticipated death, to avenge one that has already occurred, or to inter the dead, is the very subject of the supplication whose gestures so carefully mimic those of ancient mourning practices.

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Seaford, Reciprocity and Ritual. Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 91-92

<sup>18</sup> W.B. Stanford, Greek Tragedy and the Emotions: an Introductory Study (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 23-24

There is a curious conflation of the two ideas of mourning and supplication in Sophokles' Aias. In this, the son of the dead Aias is instructed by his uncle to sit beside the corpse of his father as a suppliant

ἐν χερσίν ἔχων

κόμας ἐμὰς καὶ τῆσδε καὶ σαυτοῦ τρίτου.

ἰκτήριον θησαυρόν

holding in your hand

(a lock of) my hair and hers (sc. your mother's) and thirdly your own,  
a treasury of supplicatory tokens (Sophokles, Aias 1173-75).

Thus, the traditional offerings to the dead, locks of hair from close relatives, are to be used in place of the olive branches brandished by suppliants, and indeed are compared with those supplicatory tokens. There is no sense in the text that these locks of hair are seen as the only substitute available; granted, one may infer that few if any olive trees were near at hand, but there are many precedents for supplication without the use of any olive branches at all. Instead, in this case there does appear to be a deliberate blurring of the division between the traditional rites for the dead and supplication: for the purpose of this supplication is that the corpse be preserved from desecration, for honourable interment by mourning relatives.

### **Supplication at a holy place**

Direct supplication of the person able to grant the request was not always practical. Thus our sources describe many cases of people seeking sanctuary at an altar, a statue of a god or some other sacred place. The key action here again seems to be to attain and maintain physical contact. Andromakhe throws her arms around the statue of the goddess (Euripides, Andromakhe 115). The Kylonians, though persuaded to leave their refuge at the feet of the statue, maintain contact with the statue by means of a

braided thread.<sup>19</sup> Only when that breaks (fortuitously?) are they killed (Plutarch, Solon 12.1).<sup>20</sup> The suppliant Orestes twines his arms around the statue of Athene (Aiskhylos, Eumenides 258-60). One could even merely fling oneself onto the images of the gods (Aiskhylos, Seven against Thebes 95-96, 185-86), or stretch out one's hands to the gods (ibid., 171-72). Iolaos sends Alkmene and the daughters of Herakles inside the temple while he and Herakles' sons remain outside, in supplication. He considers it shameful that young girls should attract the gaze of the public on the altar-steps (Euripides, Children of Herakles 41-44). Kreousa is advised to seat herself on the altar (Euripides, Ion 1258). Supplication at an altar was not necessarily considered a second best option: Klytaimestra, while clinging to Akhilleus' knees, excuses her actions on the grounds that there is no altar to which she could flee (Euripides, Iphigeneia at Aulis 911). Calculated ingenuousness: for Akhilleus is, in fact, the perfect target for her appeal. It was on the grounds of a putative marriage to him that Iphigeneia had been brought to Aulis, so he bears some moral responsibility for the use made of his name (as Klytaimestra is at pains to point out – 903-08); and he is, after

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<sup>19</sup> A scholion to Aristophanes claims that it was not a thread, but a suppliant branch (or a series of them linked together). This chain of branches collapses, presumably because of its increasing length. (Σ Aristophanes, Knights 445 - ἐκ τῶν ἀλιτηρίων). Another scholion on the same verse omits the attempt to remain in contact with the statue of Athene, and only relates how some suppliants were dragged away from their sanctuary to be killed.

<sup>20</sup> Neither Thucydides nor Herodotus mention the braided thread; instead, they claim the suppliants were persuaded to leave the sanctuary, with the guarantee of their lives (Thucydides 1.126.11, Herodotus 5.71.2). This promise was broken, without the historians giving the extra rationalisation of the rejection of the goddess, as indicated by the broken thread (an explanation given by Plutarch, Solon 12.1). Is Plutarch here reinterpreting his material, in order to make it fit his own conception of the political situation (as argued by C.B.R. Pelling, in another context - "Plutarch and Roman politics", Past Perspectives: studies in Greek and Roman historical writing. Papers presented in Leeds, 6-8 April 1983 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], p. 183)?

For further discussion of the tradition of the thread, see below, pp. 49-50.

all, a hero, one whose voice should be heard, and one who as a human has a more physical presence than a mere deity.

The altar was not the only hallowed place where a suppliant may seek succour. Themistokles, fleeing the wrathful Athenians, prostrates himself at the hearth of Admetos (Thucydides 1.136.4, Plutarch, Themistokles 24.3). The presence of the king's son in his arms at that moment must have been a powerful inducement for Admetos to accede to his wishes; however, that Themistokles should choose to abase himself at the hearth is not insignificant. The hearth was, after all, the centre of the home, the site of domestic sacrifice; within the home, it would be difficult to find a site more suitable for claiming divine protection while requesting shelter from a mortal. It is from the hearth that Alkinoos (eventually!) raises the suppliant Odysseus (Odyssey 7.168-9). His sitting beside the hearth is an intensification of his previous supplicatory gesture of clasping Arete's knees in his arms (ibid., 7.142) - and, incidentally, his own augmentation of Nausikaa's instructions (ibid., 6.310-15): apparently it was not even inspired by Athene (ibid., 7.48-77). The hearth, being in itself sacred, offered protection to the suppliant, conferring its sacredness on any in contact with it; such people were considered under the protection of the gods, especially Zeus.<sup>21</sup> There was no need to explain the source of this protection: Homer, Thucydides and Plutarch merely tell of the suppliant's sitting at the hearth, and the response that gesture provoked. Andokides, too, is saved at a moment of extreme peril by leaping to the hearth and taking hold of τῶν ἱερῶν (the sacred things). This, he claims in gratitude, is all that saved him: the gods were merciful, if men were not (Andokides, On his return 15). This is presumably the same hearth at which Mantitheos

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<sup>21</sup> As pointed out by Martin P. Nilsson, Greek Popular Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), pp. 76-77.

and Apsephion took refuge, thus gaining the time they needed to flee (Andokides, On the mysteries 44). There is no mention of Zeus or of any other god: it would appear that the divine presence at, or power associated with, the hearth was so well understood as not to need any mention. Despite, or perhaps occasioning, this silence, sitting at the hearth had the same force as clinging to an altar or statue of a god: in each case, the suppliant was seeking to share in the holiness inherent in the structure.

As well as, or even instead of, establishing physical contact, the suppliant could adorn the statue of the supplicated god. The chorus asks (rhetorically!) when they should place around the statues sacred robes and crowns in supplication (Aiskhylos, Seven against Thebes 101-02). Hogan justly observes that the πέπλος is a gift to accompany the chorus' supplication,<sup>22</sup> probably intended to sweeten the demand or create a debt where none previously existed. For the same purpose Iokaste plans to take gifts to the gods; the inference that she intends to supplicate the gods on Oidipous' behalf is clear (Sophokles, Oidipous the King 911-15). Some suppliants omit the gift, and merely place wreaths around the altar (Euripides, Children of Herakles 70-71, 123-25). Another option is to embellish the altar with olive boughs. The people of Thebes, faced with disaster, hold olive branches while sitting around the palace altars burning incense and crying laments (Sophokles, Oidipous the King 2-5). Suppliants could also place branches beside them while they remain at the altar (Aiskhylos, Suppliants 241-42). They appeal to Zeus ἰκέσιος, as the appropriate god and as their ancestor (*ibid.*, 40-49), but not at his altar. The altar is curiously anonymous; it is spoken of as κοινοβωμία (*ibid.*, 222 - altars shared in common). Johansen and Whittle note that this is the only

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<sup>22</sup> James C. Hogan, A Commentary on the Complete Greek Tragedies. Aeschylus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 247

attested use of this word.<sup>23</sup> One may thus infer that just as Aiskhylos apparently invented the word, he possibly invented the idea of one altar serving many unnamed gods. Indeed, as Kuntz points out, the altar is inconsequential in the play, except as a generic altar. It is the ritual actions which are of importance in the dramatic proceedings.<sup>24</sup> Another ritual action which is of no little significance to Pelasgos is the fact that the suppliants have placed the branches before the altars, thus reverencing the Greek gods, despite the Danaids' alien appearance and origin.<sup>25</sup> It is this action which gives the suppliants a claim to protection from Greeks.

Orestes announces his intention of presenting himself as a suppliant at the holy place of Apollon ξὺν τῷδε θαλλῶ καὶ στέφει (with this olive shoot and wreath - Aiskhylos, Libation Bearers 1035). The bough could be twined with wool: the prophetess of Apollon sees Orestes sitting in the seat of suppliants, holding a drawn sword and an olive branch crowned with white wool (Aiskhylos, Eumenides 40-45).<sup>26</sup> The Danaids carry wool-

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<sup>23</sup> H. Friis Johansen and Edward W. Whittle, Aeschylus. The Suppliants (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1980), vol. 2 p. 178, on v. 222

<sup>24</sup> Mary Kuntz, Narrative Setting and Dramatic Poetry (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), p. 61

<sup>25</sup> As observed by Johansen and Whittle, op. cit., vol. 2 pp. 194-95, on vv. 241-42.

<sup>26</sup> The drawn sword adds an interesting insistence to the supplication. One also notes the ἔδραν ... προστρόπαιον. That he should have drawn his sword while sitting on the ἄμφαλος is odd; surely it would have been a profanation of so holy a place or, on a more earthly level, have signified distrust in Apollon's ability to protect his suppliant even in the god's own dwelling. It is also unclear how effective a defence against the immortal Erinyes a mere sword could be. Orestes, however, does display some fear that Apollon may be unable to protect him from such determined pursuers - after all, he has undergone a purification ritual, and still found himself pursued (vv. 280-83). The god, it seems, cannot save him from the fury of the Erinyes by his own power: Orestes must seek refuge at Athene's statue, and his actions will be judged there (vv. 79-83). Apollon may have the power to cast them into sleep (vv. 67-68); he cannot force them to forgo their prey. This power is reserved for Athene. Little wonder that Orestes, in his first comments to Apollon, complains that the god has not given him the assistance which he is empowered to do (vv. 85-87).

wreathed branches as they seek assistance from the king (Aiskhylos, Suppliants 19-22). Later, Pelasgos comments on the white crowning their boughs (ibid., 334). Branches could even be draped over the statues of the gods (ibid., 345); this is seen as a sign of supplication, and bough-draped altars (even those not occupied by the suppliants themselves) could be used as a means of informing the populace that certain people were claiming sanctuary (ibid., 480-85).<sup>27</sup> The desperate Orestes, supplicating Menelaos by clasping his knees, offers as a substitute for the missing supplicatory bough

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Even more sacrilegious is the scene observed by the priestess of a man αίματι σταζόντα χείρας (vv. 41-42). Hogan (op. cit., pp. 151-52) speculates that the audience must have initially inferred that this blood is the blood of Klytaimestra, a shocking profanation of the temple; later it is revealed (vv. 281-85) that Orestes has already undergone purification, so this must be blood from that rite. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, too, understands this to be the blood of the sacrificial victim (Aeschylus: Oresteia. Eumenides ("The Kindly Ones") [London: Duckworth, 1979], p. 14 on v. 41). However, as Sommerstein points out, the Eumenides claim to be able to track him by the drops of blood from his mother's murder (vv. 247, 253), even after his purification. He infers that it is supposed that "the taint of blood can *never* be washed off the guilty hand". Thus, he argues persuasively, this blood, fanciful though the idea may seem, is probably meant to be understood as the blood of Klytaimestra, still present on his hands and his sword, despite purification and the passage of time (Alan H. Sommerstein, Aeschylus. Eumenides [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], p. 89 on vv. 41-43). Probably the blood is not literally present: the audience would not have seen gore dripping onto the stage. The Priestess, however, does see blood; possibly the audience is to understand that she is able to see the symbolic blood which the Erinyes can smell. A.W. Verrall suggests an interesting, if convoluted, interpretation of this blood. Seeking a realistic explanation, he proposes that the blood the Erinyes have followed is Orestes' own blood, dripping from his mouth as a result of internal bleeding which, postulates Verrall, the lengthy and arduous escape has inflicted on him (The "Eumenides" of Aeschylus. With an Introduction, Commentary, and Translation [London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1908], p. 47 on v. 244). This suggestion is difficult to accept: the Priestess makes no mention of blood dripping from any part of Orestes' body but the hands. It is also hard to imagine a man in such a debilitated state able to proceed to Athens.

<sup>27</sup> Johansen and Whittle (op. cit., vol. 2 p. 379, on vv. 482-83) note that there appears to be a dearth of parallels for the taking of boughs from where they have already been placed around one altar so that they may be set down around another.

the ἀφύλλους στόματος ... λιτάς (the leafless prayers of lips - Euripides, Orestes 383).<sup>28</sup> In Athens, any person who wished to speak to the people on any matter could place the ἱκετηρία on the altar, as sign of supplication (Constitution of the Athenians 43.6). This item, which one may infer was an olive branch, possibly decorated, indicates that the individual is claiming the suppliant's right to a hearing; Rhodes points out that here the act of supplication has been formalised in a political setting.<sup>29</sup>

The use of wool strands is worthy of note. As seen above, an olive branch, which could have been wreathed with white wool, seems to have been a universally-recognised symbol of supplication. In Athens, there was a festival held on the sixth day of the month of Mounikhion in which young Athenian girls would carry wool-wreathed branches taken from the sacred olive tree to the temple of Apollon at the Delphinion (Plutarch, Theseus 18.2). According to Plutarch, this dates from the time of Theseus, when, immediately prior to sailing to Crete with his fellow victims, he dedicated just such a branch to Apollon (ibid., 18.1). Olive branches crowned with wool were also used as εἰρεσιῶναί. These, hung with pastry models of such items as harps, cups and vine-branches, as well as real pieces of fruit, were carried around by groups of boys who called at the doors of houses singing certain verses (ibid., 22). The householder was expected to give a gift to the

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<sup>28</sup> Probably this is best seen as almost an apology from Orestes for the lack of the freshly-cut supplicatory branches, a reference to the circumstances which prevent his being able to carry out this part of the ritual (as is implied by C.W. Willink, Euripides. Orestes. With Introduction and Commentary [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986], p. 148 on v. 383). Wedd's interpretation of the same verse, that Orestes "regards his prayers as suppliant boughs and Menelaus' knees as an altar of refuge" (N. Wedd, The Orestes of Euripides. Edited with Introduction, Notes and Metrical Appendix [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895], p. 89 on v. 383), is more difficult to accept.

<sup>29</sup> P.J. Rhodes, A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenian Politeia (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 528

youths. Obviously the branches decorated in this way symbolised fruitfulness.<sup>30</sup> According to Plutarch, this practice is associated with Theseus' dedication of the suppliant bough to Apollon (*ibid.*, 22). However, it is not clear whether the wool used was spun into threads, or whether the strands were torn from the fleece. More obviously purificatory was the use of the new-shorn wool the chorus instructed Oidipous to use in the prescribed rite, in order to atone for having profaned sacred ground by trespassing on it (Sophokles, *Oidipous at Kolonos* 475). Whether this was an intrinsic property which the wool possessed, or one conferred on it by the ritual, is open to conjecture. Certainly the rite was in preparation for making supplication to the Eumenides (*ibid.*, 486-87); Oidipous is even instructed to lay down on his libation (poured from a vessel decorated with the wool - *ibid.*, 472-73, 478-89) a certain number of olive branches (*ibid.*, 483-84), once more associating olive branches and wool in a supplicatory ritual. Was wool used because it was in some way associated with purity, and was therefore assimilated with the holy?

In one case, a suppliant is said to be able to wait by a gate, and be known as a suppliant by anyone passing (Aiskhylos, *Libation Bearers* 567-70). Precisely where the suppliants are to wait in relation to the gate, and what pose they will adopt, is not clear from the text. Perhaps the very presence of two strangers by a closed gate may be enough to stir curiosity and comment, that they should be left outside by the inhabitants of the house. In the event, this supplication does not take place, because the strangers are welcomed inside before it becomes necessary. However, the manner of the proposed supplication is intriguingly singular.

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<sup>30</sup> As noted by H.W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), p. 76.

Also singular is the supplication in the Aias. It is unclear who is being supplicated here. The suppliant, of course, is the child, who seeks to protect the body of his father, as well as his own life. Normally, an individual would supplicate the person (or god) with the power to grant whatever is required. In this case, however, it would seem at first that it is the body of Aias which is being supplicated, the very body which needs protection. The humans who have the power to protect both the corpse and the child are Menelaos, Agamemnon and Odysseus; yet there is no suggestion that any request for aid be put to them. Indeed, the suppliant says nothing at all in the extant text. Just who is expected to confer protection Teukros does not say. Perhaps one may infer that the silent plea is to be directed to the gods, or to one unnamed deity. Burian, however, suggests that it is Aias himself to whom the supplication is directed, not Aias the victim but Aias the hero. By supplicating the body, Burian argues persuasively, the child confers on the corpse the power of a τάφος, the tomb of a fallen hero. Just such a tomb protects Helen (Euripides, Helen 63-65). Thus, symbolically at least, and through the quick thinking of his brother and the action of his son, the hero becomes a τάφος even before burial.<sup>31</sup> Segal would appear to concur: he asserts that Aias' curse on the Atreids (Sophokles, Aias 835 ff) is answered by the power to curse which can protect suppliants at his corpse, a curse which, almost as proxy for his dead brother, Teukros enunciates (ibid., 1175-79).<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Aias' silent son, by supplicating at his father's corpse, is granted the power to direct Aias' curses at any who interfere with the body. The power of these curses originated with Aias; it is therefore Aias who must be supplicated for the right to direct them more specifically.

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Burian, "Supplication and hero cult in Sophocles' *Ajax*", Greek, Roman and Byzantine studies XIII (1972), pp. 154-55

<sup>32</sup> Charles Segal, Tragedy and Civilisation. An Interpretation of Sophocles (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 143

There are other suppliants who sit at tombs to make their appeal. Seeking to avoid an unwanted marriage, Helen seeks refuge at the tomb of the dead Proteus, the Egyptian king (Euripides, Helen 63-67; 797-801). This apparently keeps Theoklymenos at bay. Later, when she first sees Menelaos, she mistakes him for a robber, and clings to the tomb again (ibid., 556). Elektra claims that both she and Orestes are suppliants at their father's tomb (Aiskhylos, Libation Bearers 336-37), and each makes certain requests of the dead king (ibid., 456; 479-80; 481-82; 500-09). Of course, there is no one present but a sympathetic chorus at this point of the play. Neither Elektra nor Orestes have any (expressed) fear of being surprised by their mother or stepfather while beside the tomb, so make no claim that it will save them from attack. Hogan<sup>33</sup> observes that in vv. 336-7 Elektra likens the tomb to an altar; probably the metaphor was more literary than literal. The chorus anticipates that identification (ibid., 106), and later comments that as a result of Elektra's and Orestes' supplication at their father's tomb

τῶν μὲν ἄρωγοὶ  
κατὰ γῆς ἦδη  
already (there are) supporters  
among those beneath the earth (ibid., 376-77).

By contrast, Mikalson argues persuasively that Elektra and Orestes are here addressing Agamemnon as a hero, and not as a deceased human, nor even as a god.<sup>34</sup> Here, Agamemnon is being asked for assistance in the achievement of stated objectives. There is thus a distinction between their use of the tomb here, and Orestes' use of the temple of Apollon (Aiskhylos, Eumenides 40-45). There is a distinction, too, in the individual to whom the

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<sup>33</sup> Op. cit., p. 119

<sup>34</sup> Jon D. Mikalson, Honor Thy Gods. Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 36

appeal is addressed - in the Libation Bearers, the royal siblings are petitioning a human, however deceased; in the Eumenides, Orestes, now a matricide in fact as well as intention, supplicates a god for defence against other gods.

### **Analysis of supplicatory gestures**

Parker attempts an analysis of supplication, based on an estimate of the degree of constraint placed upon the supplicated.<sup>35</sup> Faced with contradictory material, he separates Homeric and classical supplication. In Homer he claims there are two types of suppliants, "help me" and "spare me" suppliants. The former he equates to strangers, entering foreign territory. Such suppliants, he argues, have a strong claim not to be harmed by the person/s being supplicated, guaranteed by Zeus *hikesios* and Zeus *xenios*. "Spare me" suppliants, he asserts, are typically appealing for mercy in battle, and as such are not really suppliants; therefore they have no absolute claim on protection.<sup>36</sup> As an example of the lack of protection offered to the battlefield suppliant, he cites the case of Lykaon beseeching Akhilleus for his life.<sup>37</sup> Lykaon does liken himself to a suppliant (Iliad 21.75); however, Parker ignores the Trojan's desperate clutching at Akhilleus' knees (ibid., 21.64-69, 71), and the (albeit brief) stay of execution this brings him; Akhilleus is determined to kill him, but pauses long enough for Lykaon to make an impassioned plea, and to respond (ibid., 21.74-113). The poet is also careful to note that before the fatal blow is delivered, Lykaon spreads his arms wide, no longer a suppliant (ibid., 21.115-16). The significance of this abandonment of the rights of the suppliant is not addressed by Parker: true, Akhilleus has made it clear he is determined to

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Parker, Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 181-86

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 182

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 181-82

kill Lykaon, but he does not kill him while the Trojan is clutching his knees. What Akhilleus would have done if Lykaon had retained his clutch on the Akhaian's knees is something that the poet does not address - perhaps significantly? Another factor in the incident not noted by Parker is the ferocity of Akhilleus' grief at this stage of the poem. The Akhaian himself alludes to it, and ascribes his imperviousness to pleas for mercy to his despair over the death of Patroklos (*ibid.*, 21.100-06). Further evidence of his murderous rage is his contemptuous treatment of Lykaon's corpse (*ibid.*, 21.120-27). Surely Akhilleus, at this point in the epic, cannot be thought to be displaying the behaviour that would have been expected of a Homeric hero.

Another battlefield suppliant whose fate is not without relevance to this question is Adrestos. Sent sprawling into the dust when Menelaos smashed his chariot, Adrestos clutches the Spartan's knees and begs for his life, promising a generous ransom (*ibid.*, 6.45-50). Cupidity being one of the more prominent qualities of the Epic hero, Menelaos is persuaded (*ibid.*, 6.51), but his brother is not. Surely it is significant that it is Agamemnon and not Menelaos who dispatches the suppliant Adrestos, even though Menelaos is careful to break the contact between himself and the suppliant (*ibid.*, 6.61-65):

ὁ δ' ἀπὸ ἔθεν ὤσατο χειρὶ  
ἦρω ἼΑδρηστον·

With his hand he shoved the hero Adrestos  
from him (*ibid.*, 6.62-63)

If Adrestos has no claim on Menelaos, why is Homer careful to point out that it is Agamemnon, not the person supplicated, who gives decisive effect to the refusal of Adrestos' plea? The fate of Adrestos, however, is not mentioned by Parker.

The other category of Homeric suppliants that Parker describes is the "help me" suppliants, typically strangers entering foreign territory.<sup>38</sup> One would expect, therefore, that the supplication of Akhilleus by Priamos, in the Akhaian camp, would be a paradigmatic "help me" supplication. The Trojan king is certainly a stranger in a strange, even hostile, community.<sup>39</sup> He is in urgent need of protection from the man he supplicates. Yet so far does he have "an absolute claim not to be harmed"<sup>40</sup> by the man he supplicates that it takes divine intervention, including persuasion from his devoted mother, to persuade Akhilleus to protect Priamos (*ibid.*, 24.31-140, esp. 128-40). One notes that Zeus himself does not give the order to Akhilleus: it is Thetis who is prevailed upon to cajole her son into acquiescence (*ibid.*, 24.104-19). Zeus is not certain that the power of even his name will suffice to convince Akhilleus (*ibid.*, 24.116). Even with this persuasion, the anger of Akhilleus is close to the surface: when Priamos shows reluctance to accept his invitation to sit, Akhilleus warns his suppliant not to antagonise him, or he may do him harm, despite the gods' orders and their obvious protection of the king (*ibid.*, 24.560, 568-70). Certainly, the Akhaian does not harm the king, but the interplay between them, the implicit and explicit tensions in their encounter, demonstrate that this was not the only possible outcome.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181

<sup>39</sup> Yet is he a complete stranger to Akhilleus? Though they have apparently never met, there is a prior relationship between the two men, even if indirectly: after all, Akhilleus has spent several years trying to capture Priamos' city, has killed Priamos' son. This surely creates some link between them, despite Pedrick (*op. cit.*, p. 127). Certainly these two are not strangers in the same sense as Odysseus and Admetos, with whom Pedrick compares them.

<sup>40</sup> Parker, *loc. cit.*

There are then some difficulties with Parker's two categories, and the presupposition of success associated with each. As well, in some cases it is difficult to assign individual suppliants to one category or the other. When the fatally wounded Hektor supplicates Akhilleus, is he a "help me" or a "spare me" suppliant? He does not request that he be spared, even for ransom; instead, he begs that his body not be dishonoured (ibid., 22.337-43). Surely he cannot then be a "spare me" suppliant, as might be suggested by the battlefield setting. Similarly, he cannot be a "help me" suppliant, as both are on the neutral ground of a battlefield, and Hektor is no stranger come into Akhilleus' territory. Parker's analysis is too neat, too tidy; it is not supported by the evidence in Homer.

Parker notes that in classical times two changes to supplication took place. He observes that supplication is now commonly at an altar instead of at the knees of an individual, and that altars usually serve as an asylum in times of either war or civic unrest.<sup>41</sup> He does, however, acknowledge certain cases which weaken this tidy division. One among the throng of Helen's suitors, who are now being massacred, vacillates between rushing to an altar to seek refuge, or supplicating at the knees of Odysseus (Odyssey 22.334-37). Another exception to Parker's suggestion of innovation is the reliance of the Kylonian conspirators on their refuge at the temple of Athene (Thucydides 1.126.10-12; Herodotus 5.71).<sup>42</sup> Two more pre-classical figures who rely on altars as places of refuge are Cassandra and Aias. After the fall of Troy, Cassandra, in a futile attempt to avoid rape, clings to the statue of Athene. Her rapist, Aias son of Ileos, seeking to avoid retribution for this outrage upon the sanctuary offered by the goddess, flees to the altar of the same divinity (Sack of Ilium 1; Pausanias, Description of Greece

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 182-83

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 182 n. 212

10.26.3; Virgil, Aeneid 2.403-06). The use of altars as places of refuge is therefore not unattested even well before the classical period; it is, however, relatively rare. True, there does appear to be a far greater use of holy places in the classical period. The change, however, is probably more apparent than real. Parker does not take into account the nature of the sources. For the early periods, the sources are almost entirely literary, where a vivid story need not be constrained by inconvenient reality. The case is far different in historical writings, particularly when the author is writing about events known to his audience, whether from experience or from other writers. The change Parker detects could well be a difference between the nature of the sources on which reliance must be placed.<sup>43</sup>

### **Self-abasement**

Gould notes the self-abasement of the suppliant: s/he uses the posture and manner of a slave.<sup>44</sup> Thus does Priamos, king of Troy, who is abject when he begs for the body of his son (Iliad 24.477-506). So too does Themistokles, prostrate on the hearth of the king (Thucydides 1.136.4; Plutarch, Themistokles 24.5). Each emphasises the humiliation of his present position, while magnifying the dignity of the person supplicated. Arms are discarded: the "Cretan" throws away his helmet, shield and spear before, helpless, he approaches the Egyptian king (Odyssey 14.276-77). For a warrior on a battlefield this is a quite literal abandonment of his dignity. The hands he stretches out to the king are empty not only of weapons but of his own honour. Suppliants may also indicate the surrender of their honour by a display of distress. Just so the Argive women weep and tear their cheeks, as they supplicate Aithra (Euripides, Suppliants 48-51); Iphigeneia weeps as she clings to Agamemnon's knees (Euripides, Iphigeneia at Aulis

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<sup>43</sup> For a more detailed analysis of changes in supplication, see below, pp. 135-51.

<sup>44</sup> Gould, op. cit., pp. 94-95

1214-19). Klytaimestra places emphasis on her distress by her assertion to Akhilleus,

οὐκ ἐπαιδεσθησόμαί γε προσπεσεῖν τὸ σὸν γόνυ

I will not be in the least ashamed to fall down at your knees (*ibid.*, 900).

Ephialtes, seeking refuge *μονοχίτων* (wearing only a tunic - Constitution of the Athenians 25.4), states his surrender of *τιμή* (honour) by implication.<sup>45</sup> Odysseus, a spy in besieged Troy, dresses as a beggar; he recalls his humiliation clearly, *οὐ γὰρ ἄκρας καρδίας ἔψαυσέ μου* (for it touched my heart not on the surface - Euripides, Hekabe 242). When recognised by Helen, he does not hesitate to abase himself before Hekabe. In an account which he does not dispute, she reminds him that on that occasion he was *ταπεινός* (abject - *ibid.*, 245) and even *δοῦλος* (servile - *ibid.*, 247).

Certainly there seems to be a need to emphasise the contrast between the former state of suppliants and their present humiliation. The former states of Priamos, Themistokles and Odysseus are well known to the persons being supplicated; their mere appearance in a demeaning position emphasises the loss of their former power. On the other hand, when the daughter of Hegetorides of Kos approaches Pausanias, to whom she is not known (though he is a friend of her father), she feels impelled to emphasise the contrast between her former and present states by dressing herself and her maids in their finest clothes (Herodotus 9.76.1). In each case, the individual supplicated in effect raises the suppliant to (nearly!) the position

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<sup>45</sup> Probably von Fritz and Kapp, in their comment about this garment being "the appropriate attire of a suppliant" (Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*, and Related Texts. Translated with an Introduction and Notes [New York: Hafner Press, 1974], p. 95 fn. b), refer to this requirement of self-abasement. His relative nakedness is a dramatic statement of his helplessness (Brian Vickers, Towards Greek Tragedy: Drama, Myth, Society [London: Longman, 1973], p. 443), a helplessness either real or assumed.

of honour s/he has abandoned. The action of supplication involves, as Gould rightly observes, "an inversion of the normal patterns of behaviour".<sup>46</sup> However, care is taken that the contrast between the dignity that the suppliant could, and does, claim is made clear. Accordingly, there is emphasised the suppliant's self-abasement, the desperation; by implication, it would be shameful for the person supplicated to refuse to restore the surrendered dignity of the suppliant. Also, the person supplicated could see in this calculated display an implicit promise to reciprocate appropriately: after all, it is potentially more profitable for an individual of wealth and power to be in one's debt than it would be to succour a poor man. As Finley rightly observes in the context of guest-friendship, an individual's worth as guest-friend (and, by extension, suppliant?) was directly proportional to the power that person possessed.<sup>47</sup>

In the self-abasement of the suppliant, there is at least an implicit emphasis on the dignity and honour of the supplicated, by the calculated contrast between the participants. This is sometimes conveyed in words. The priest is quick to flatter Oidipous, when he and the people supplicate him to succour the stricken city. They have come to him not because they believe him to be a god, but because he is ἀνδρῶν δὲ πρῶτον (the first among men - Sophokles, *Oidipous the King* 33), κράτιστον πᾶσιν (most powerful according to everyone - *ibid.*, 40), and βροτῶν ἄριστε (best of living men - *ibid.*, 46). He pleads that they be able to remember the whole of Oidipous' reign with the same fondness with which they recall its beginning (*ibid.*, 49-51), artfully combining flattery and threat in one entreaty. Klytaimestra, desperate to save her daughter from sacrifice, assures

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<sup>46</sup> Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 95

<sup>47</sup> M.I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (2nd ed tion. London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), p. 102.

Akhilleus that he has only to extend his hand over Iphigeneia's head, and she is safe (Euripides, Iphigeneia at Aulis 915-60). Generally, however, the flattery of the supplicated remained unspoken, implicit in the suppliant's humble posture. Themistokles flatters Admetos indirectly by his actions and subtly by his words. He argues that it would be shameful for a man to avenge a slight when his opponent is at a disadvantage (Thucydides 1.136.4). Thus he both acknowledges his desperation and Admetos' power - but emphasises his trust in the king's honour.

The ritual self-abasement required of suppliants is emphasised by the vocabulary used. The animal intended as a sacrifice to Hestia in Kos must indicate its consent by lowering its head. The verb used for this is ὑποκύπτω, whose primary meaning is to stoop under a yoke.<sup>48</sup> It is used thus by Herodotos, in reference to formal submission to the Persians (Herodotos 1.130.1, 6.109.3, 6.25.2). The implication of enslavement is clear, especially when he speaks of the danger to the Athenians (ibid., 6.109.3). Aristophanes uses the word mischievously in an instruction to the Theban slave about to carry out the packaged informer (Aristophanes, Akharneans 954). Could one infer the suggestion that those who trust informers enslave themselves to them? Figuratively, it is used to denote the actions of suppliants. This is the clear intent of Aristophanes' use when describing those plaintiffs who bow down before Philokleon, as he claims that the ὑποκύπτοντες supplicate the speaker (Aristophanes, Wasps 555). The suppliant (literally or metaphorically) bows the head, placing it under the yoke of Zeus, under the god's protection.<sup>49</sup> The comparison with the

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<sup>48</sup> F. Sokolowski, Lois Sacrées des Cités Grecques (Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1969), 151.19

<sup>49</sup> Marcel Detienne, "Culinary practices and the spirit of sacrifice", The cuisine of sacrifice among the Greeks, translated by Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 9

sacrificial victim, which it is supposed has acquiesced in its fate, could be said to indicate the suppliants' submission to the will of the god, perhaps even their readiness to sacrifice their own independent will to the divine pleasure.

Some find the surrender of their status too shameful to bear. Oidipous refuses to twine his hand around Kreon's knees in supplication, as this would label him a coward, and betray his noble birth (Euripides, Phoinikian Maidens 1622-24). Equally adamant is Menelaos, who exclaims

ἐγὼ σὸν οὔτ' ἄν προπεσεῖν τλαίην γόνυ  
οὔτ' ἄν δακρῦσαι βλέφαρα· τὴν Τροίαν γὰρ ἄν  
δειλοὶ γενόμενοι πλείστον αἰσχύνοιμεν ἄν.

I cannot bear to fall at your knee  
nor to flood my eyes with tears; for we would

shame Troy utterly by becoming cowardly. (Euripides, Helen 947-49).

This obsessive concern with his κλέος, his reliance on Troy as his claim to identity, is in this alien setting unrealistic.<sup>50</sup> Just as desperately concerned with status is Hermione, who dreads that she may be forced to kneel, a slave at the feet of a slave (Euripides, Andromakhe 861). Though he feels shame that he, a king, should kneel at the feet of Theseus, Adrestos overcomes it, and begs for assistance (Euripides, Suppliants 164-47). The proud Medeia begs a concession from Kreon, and then declares defiantly that she would not have flattered him if she did not have an ulterior motive (Euripides, Medeia 368-69). Hekabe too is concerned with the last dregs of her pride: not that she would surrender this by begging, but by being refused. Odysseus has already refused her, and she deliberates whether to supplicate Agamemnon, as

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Segal, "The two worlds of Euripides' *Helen*", Transactions of the American Philological Association CII (1971), pp. 576-78

εἴ με δούλην πολεμίαν θ' ἠγούμενος  
γονάτων ἀπώσαιτ', ἄλγος ἄν προσθείμεθ' ἄν.

if, regarding me as a slave and an enemy  
he pushed me back from his knees, I would give myself over to  
anguish (Euripides, Hekabe 741-42).

Those who found the role of a suppliant too demeaning usually had a high regard for their own honour. In literature, it is apparent that many saw supplication as being more appropriate for women and children than men, more fitting for slaves than for free men.<sup>51</sup> As Telemakhos comments to the disguised Odysseus,

αἰδῶς δ' οὐκ ἀγαθὴ κεχρημένῳ ἀνδρὶ παρεῖναι

a sense of shame for a man in need is not useful (Odyssey 17.347).

Certainly it is generally men of the noble classes who find supplication demeaning, and Euripidean men at that. Oidipous will not act in a manner contrary to his royal status by clasping Kreon's knees (Euripides, Phoinikian Maidens 1623-24), Menelaos is afraid of being seen as a coward (Euripides, Helen 947-49), and Adrestos has to subdue the remains of his royal dignity before he can embrace Theseus' knees in supplication (Euripides, Suppliants 164-67). Royal ladies too are sometimes reluctant to surrender their dignity: both Hermione (Euripides, Andromakhe 861) and Hekabe (Euripides, Hekabe 741-42) express disinclination to supplicate others, disinclination which is however overcome. The exception is Odysseus: ever the pragmatist, he shows no hesitation in supplicating Hekabe when he is exposed as a spy in Troy. Without any sense of shame, he admits that he was then humbled (ibid., 245), clinging to her in desperation, begging for his life (ibid., 239-50). Nor is he reluctant to

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<sup>51</sup> As astutely observed by Ann Norris Michelini, Euripides and the Tragic Tradition (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press. 1987), p. 176.

supplicate Arete and Admetos (Odyssey 7.142-54), or even to beg food from the suitors of his own wife (ibid., 17.ε65-66). Only once does he hesitate: washed up on the shore of Skheria, he does not approach Nausikaa immediately he sees her. He is not, however, considering whether he is desperate enough to surrender his φιλοτιμία by supplicating her, but merely how he may supplicate her so as to cause her the least alarm, thereby maximising his own chances of success (ibid., 6.141-48).

It would be surprising if historical figures, faced with a threat of immediate death, were to display reluctance to demean themselves through supplication, if such an act may save their lives. The evidence would suggest that no indecision was evident: Themistokles was not unwilling to resort to supplication, nor was Pausanias. The followers of Kylon did not hesitate to flee to the temple for refuge. Thucydides' narrative of the civil strife in Kerkyra suggests that the suppliants lost no time in fleeing to the altars (Thucydides 3.75.3). Their lives meant more than their dignity; it is only in literature that a character could afford to debate the relative values of life and glory.

Very frequently, the literary suppliant was a woman, or group of women. The demeanour expected of a suppliant accorded closely with that expected of women. The suppliant Danaids are advised by their father to conduct themselves as modest females, self-effacingly, so as to excite pity in those who see them (Aiskhylos, Suppliants 197-203). Pelasgos also observes that people pity the weak, therefore are likely to feel compassion for females seeking refuge from men (ibid., 486-89). Significantly, it is the suppliants' abandonment of the self-effacing modesty, their threat of polluting the altars by their suicide, that finally persuades Pelasgos to support their claim (ibid., 457-79). His observations about the pity excited by the weak is

thus somewhat ironic. Of course, the Danaids are scarcely helpless: from the beginning of the play, they have hinted that they will wield their power ruthlessly in order to gain their objective.<sup>52</sup> More characteristic is the helpless Andromakhe, who has no personal resources (save desperate invective - Euripides, Andromakhe e.g. 205-14, 347-49, 445-64) to pit against Menelaos and Hermione; she has no protection except the wrath of the gods (ibid., 246-60). When she is induced to leave her sanctuary, she has no defence, except through the intervention of another character. Even more helpless is Iphigeneia, whose sole chance of life lies in pleading with her father (Euripides, Iphigeneia at Aulis 1214-15). Hekabe too - old, alone, and newly enslaved - can only plead for her daughter's life (Euripides, Hekabe 275-78). The very nadir of helplessness is reached, however, by Herakles' wife Megara, who, in the face of the implacable determination of Lykos to kill her and her family, either by starvation or by fire, abandons hope of rescue by Herakles and gives herself, her children and father-in-law over to death (Euripides, Herakles 284-86, 329-31).

Many suppliants emphasise, by gestures as well as words, that they pose no threat to their prospective saviours. The "Cretan" throws away his implements of war before supplicating the Egyptian king, thereby demonstrating that he has no intention of harming the Egyptian people (Odyssey 14.276-77). The unspoken argument is that the king has nothing to fear in granting the suppliant his life. Medeia, in her supplication of Kreon, attempts to propitiate him by stating that she poses no threat to him, that he has not incurred her wrath (Euripides, Medeia 305-15). Oidipous, justifiably afraid that once the citizens of Kolonos learn who he is he will be ejected, urges the chorus not to fear him, despite his name (Sophokles, Oidipous at Kolonos 223). Odysseus' cautiously distant

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<sup>52</sup> For further discussion, see. below, pp. 94-96.

supplication of Nausikaa is intended to allay her understandable fears about this unlovely stranger (Odyssey 6.137-47). Later, warned by Athene that the people of Skheria do not welcome strangers (ibid., 7.30-34), because (one infers) they fear them, he fences adroitly with Alkinoos, subtly assuring the king that he is no danger to the Phaiekans, that he is just what he purports to be - a shipwrecked mariner who is in urgent need of assistance.<sup>53</sup> Before he is accepted as a suppliant, Themistokles too must overcome some hostility from his intended host, hostility based not on what the suppliant may do, but on what he had already done. He argues that now he is at the mercy of others (weaker than the Molossians, Themistokles is careful to state): he is in fear of his own life (Thucydides 1.136.4), and the power base that conferred on him the ability to harm Admetos in the past is gone. Therefore, for Admetos to succour Themistokles will be to risk nothing, and possibly to gain much.

Suppliants, then, conspicuously surrender any claim to honour that they may once have enjoyed. Not a few, however, protest vehemently about the aid which they claim is their due. This claim is based not on their own (surrendered) pretensions to τιμή, but to that conferred on suppliants by the gods,<sup>54</sup> particularly Zeus. Thus it is entirely consistent that the Danaids, dependent on the aid of Pelasgos, should demand that aid imperatively, in the name of Zeus (Aiskhylos, Suppliants 381-86). Andromakhe, though a slave, feels empowered to threaten Hermione with divine anger should she interfere with a suppliant (Euripides, Andromakhe 246, 258, 260). She entreats Peleus to free her, not for her own sake, but πρὸς θεῶν (for the sake of the gods - ibid., 575). Hekabe, acknowledging her own weakness, asserts

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<sup>53</sup> For more detailed argument, see below, pp. 120-27.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas L. Cairns, Aidos. The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 185

the strength of the gods, as she supplicates Agamemnon (Euripides, Hekabe 799). In dragging the suppliants away from the altar of Zeus where they had sought refuge, Kopreus is said by Iolaos to be ἀτιμάζων θεοῦς (dishonouring the gods - Euripides, Children of Herakles 78). To do such a deed is to act μήτε πρὸς βίαν θεῶν (not in accordance with the might of the gods - ibid., 97). Odysseus, supplicating Polyphemos, threatens the Kyklops with the wrath of Zeus if his reception is less than hospitable (Odyssey 9.270-71). In making this threat, he relies not on his own power but that of Zeus, not on the prospect of the human taking revenge for the slight to his honour, but Zeus avenging the insult to his. Indeed, the confidence with which suppliants could rely on the honour of Zeus being inextricably linked with their own well-being is well illustrated by the vehemence of the threat the Danaids make to pollute the land if they are not granted shelter (Aiskhylos, Suppliants 461-65). Though they surrender their claim to honour on making supplication, though some may have found such gestures too demeaning, suppliants nevertheless have conferred on them some honour, some claim to respect from the gods, principally Zeus; therefore many are able to claim that respect, that high regard as their right, by the very nature of the supplication which demanded the surrender of their personal κλέος.

The posture of the suppliant suggests powerlessness, the inability to help oneself. An individual would be unable to threaten another from a lower position, generally at the knees of the supplicated. Vickers sees in this (physically!) inferior posture the loss of the ability to move (certainly mobility was temporarily surrendered, to a great extent, by the act of kneeling or squatting), even a symbol of the death of the suppliant, until the supplicated may restore life by raising the suppliant.<sup>55</sup> In a grim mimicry of

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<sup>55</sup> Vickers, op. cit., p. 443

death ritual, Themistokles sits beside Admetos' hearth, associating himself not only with the sanctity of the place, but the dirt and ashes inevitably associated with such a location (Thucydides 1.136.3). Themistokles is fleeing for his life; by sitting beside the hearth, he may be thought to anticipate the mourning ritual in which his male relatives would engage on his death, polluting himself with dirt and ashes as mourners would pollute themselves<sup>56</sup> (at least, according to ancient practice - Plutarch, Solon 21). By physically raising him from the ashes of the hearth, Admetos undertakes to protect him from his pursuers, to save him from the death to which his action is a macabre allusion. Odysseus too sits beside the hearth when he supplicates Arete (Odyssey 7.153-54). Like Themistokles, he could be seen as anticipating through his action the death that would be his if he is not granted the assistance he begs. The apparent mimicry of death, or mourning at least, may be considered accidental; certainly in the cases of Themistokles and Odysseus, the suppliant is in danger of losing his life, and indicates that he hopes the supplicated will act to save him, but he does not overtly offer to die. Hekabe does. She entreats Odysseus to sacrifice her instead of Polyxene to the shade of Akhilleus (Euripides, Hekabe 382-88). Is she kneeling before Odysseus? Frustratingly, Euripides makes no mention of her posture. If she is on her knees, that very posture may be seen as suggesting the death that she offers. In the absence of information about Hekabe's posture, and of Themistokles' or Odysseus' unambiguous offer to die, the symbolic link between supplication and death remains speculative.

Gernet, however, subscribes to this interpretation. He sees the suppliant posture as representing the state of mourning, even the dead in

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<sup>56</sup> According to the analysis by Sourvinou-Inwood, male mourners rolled in dirt, and smeared filth on their heads - e.g. "Trauma", p. 37. Kurtz and Boardman comment on the self-pollution of mourners through this action (op. cit., p. 150).

the underworld or a condemned individual.<sup>57</sup> He notes that the similarity is not confined to the posture of kneeling: the action of raising a suppliant and thus proffering aid may be likened to raising a mortal from death. Certainly the same verb, ἀνίστημι, is used for both functions. When Aiskhylos has the chorus in the Agamemnon comment on the impossibility of bringing the dead back to life, he uses this verb (Aiskhylos, Agamemnon 1361). Likewise, Apollon notes the irreversibility of death, using ἀνίστημι (Aiskhylos, Eumenides 648). Sophokles employs the same verb when he has the chorus advise the lamenting Elektra of the impossibility of raising her father from Hades, despite her tears (Sophokles, Elektra 136-37). According to Gernet, the allusion in the choice of vocabulary is clear. Suppliants, he claims, are viewed as undergoing a symbolic death - one which however may be reversed by the supplicated raising them from their inferior position, figuratively from the dead, thus undertaking to carry out their wishes.<sup>58</sup> Such evidence is not convincing. It is difficult to see how writers may have spoken of raising the dead without using ἀνίστημι; the use of the same word may signify nothing more than the same physical action being involved - or at least imagined - in each case. In one respect, however, suppliants may be considered as dead (or at least, no longer alive in the fullest sense). Their very presence as suppliants indicated they needed assistance from another, assistance they could not provide for themselves. To the extent that supplication was an admission that they were no longer self-sufficient, independent, they were certainly indicating that they were less able to carry on with normal life than those supplicated. However, direct evidence that suppliants saw their posture as symbolic of their own death is wanting.

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<sup>57</sup> Louis Gernet, The Anthropology of Ancient Greece (Trans. by John Hamilton S.J. and Blaise Nagy; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 183

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 245-46

It is clear that, in most cases, suppliants who clung to the knees of the supplicated must themselves have been kneeling or crouching. This however is usually left unstated. The daughter of Hegetorides of Kos clutches the knees of the presumably standing Pausanias, without any suggestion of whether she herself was standing or crouching (Herodotus 9.77.1). In another context, Stanford suggests that suppliants may have initially knelt, then sat back on their heels to rest.<sup>59</sup> Yet Thetis, on finding Zeus sitting on top of a peak, does seat herself beside him while she clings to his knees with one hand (*Iliad* 1.500-01) - an awkward position. Even more awkward is the position of Priamos, when he supplicates Akhilleus. The king approaches Akhilleus while the latter is seated, stands close beside him, and clutches his knees (*ibid.*, 24.472, 478). For an old man, this is a singularly athletic feat! Surely he would have to have squatted or knelt, or perhaps sat either beside or in front of Akhilleus - but to sit before he was invited would have been a serious breach of the ceremony, dangerous in such a tense situation. Most likely one is to visualise the king kneeling or crouching before Akhilleus. The detail is, however, missing. The omission may be for the sake of the metre; however, it may also be because it would have been seen as shameful for the king to kneel. Perhaps the exact position of Odysseus when he takes the knees of the apparently seated Arete (*Odyssey* 7.142, 170-1) is omitted for a similar reason. True, the suppliant Adrestos is in the dust on his face before Akhilleus (*Iliad* 6.42), but after all he is only a Trojan.

Some are able to fall before the knees of others. The (female) chorus in Aiskhylos' Seven Against Thebes can throw themselves before the statues

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<sup>59</sup> W.B. Stanford, *Sophocles. Ajax. Edited with Introduction, Revised Text, Commentary, Appendices, Indexes and Bibliography* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1981), p. 204 on vv. 1173-75

of the gods (Aiskhylos, Seven Against Thebes 185), but this (figuratively, at least) is self-abasement before the gods. It is also condemned as base and cowardly by one of the (male) protagonists (*ibid.*, 181-92). Klytaimestra bows down to the knees of Akhilleus, but pointedly comments that she does not consider this action shameful (Euripides, Iphigeneia at Aulis 900). Hekabe ponders whether to fall at Agamemnon's knees, but rejects this as potentially too shameful (Euripides, Hekabe 737-38, 741-42). Another woman, Andromakhe, has no hesitation in falling at the feet of Peleus (Euripides, Andromakhe 572-73). The chorus of aged women supplicate Aithra by falling before her knee (Euripides, Suppliants 9-11, 44). These suppliants are, of course, Argives, and mere females; their demeanour may be contrasted with that of their king, Adrastos, who finds it shameful to fall before Theseus (*ibid.*, 164-65). A child may also fall at the feet of another: it is in this way that Molossos supplicates Menelaos (Euripides, Andromakhe 537-38).

A suppliant clinging to the knees of another must have been in a lower position than the individual supplicated, probably either kneeling or crouching. The use of the verb ἀνίστημι suggests just such an inferior position. Yet any mention of this subordination is usually avoided by the sources, especially in the case of male suppliants.

### **Conclusion**

There were several different forms of supplication recognised by the Greeks. Suppliants who chose (or for whom it was more expedient) to make supplication directly to their intended benefactors commonly clasped the persons supplicated by the knees. They could also hold them by the chin or beard, sometimes the hand as well. This grip had to be maintained; if the link between the two was broken, by whatever means, the supplication was

deemed to have lapsed, and any protection afforded to the suppliant by the ritual disappeared. Suppliants could also employ other gestures to accompany these, usually those associated with mourning. These gestures of themselves did not define supplication, but could help to make suppliants appear more pathetic to those supplicated, arousing pity and emphasising that no threat was posed. Suppliants abased themselves before individuals from whom they hoped to gain a service; their demeanour, their words conveyed consciousness of both their own helplessness and a delicate flattery of the person supplicated.

Many suppliants, by reason of the predicament in which they found themselves, were unable to place their plea directly before the people they knew could assist them. They were therefore forced to make the ritual gestures at another place and in another manner. This could be achieved by claspng an altar or the statue of a divinity. Again, the *hiketes* had either to maintain a grip on the statue, or remain within the bounds of the temple to retain the protection afforded by the status of suppliant. Alternatively, suppliants could seek refuge at the hearth of the person supplicated. Again, it was apparently necessary to remain seated there until the request had been granted. Some suppliants even found refuge at certain tombs, tombs of the highly respected dead or of heroes (or those about to gain hero status).

The gestures of the suppliant could include the adornment of statues with wreaths, crowns and robes. Most typically, supplicatory branches - branches of olive, perhaps festooned with strands of wool - could either be used to deck a statue or altar, or be carried by suppliants. Olive branches were a widely recognised symbol of supplication, even apparently in Hades.

Suppliants, by their ritual actions, were attempting to exact a service from the person or deity supplicated, by the use of moral pressure. They demanded a response from the supplicated, and endeavoured to ensure that that response would be favourable to them. However, this could not always be guaranteed.