

The Authority of Aethra in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*

Produced around 422 BCE, Euripides' *Suppliant Women* has been viewed since antiquity as a patriotic portrayal of Athens, casting the city as the hero of a suppliant drama. When Thebes refuses burial of the seven slain Argive heroes, their mothers approach Athens for help in recovering the bodies. Theseus, the Athenian leader, wages a military campaign against Thebes, retrieves the bodies, and brings them back to Athens for the performance of funerary rites. A contemporary event, the Thebans' refusal to return Athenian war dead after the Battle of Delium in 424 BCE, may have influenced the play, while Aeschylus' treatment of this minor episode of Theban myth in his *Eleusinians* possibly provided a literary prototype (Fr. 267-70 Mette; Collard 1975: 6-10; Whitehorne 1986: 68). Such myths also influenced the commonplaces of public oratory in classical Athens, perhaps reflecting the rise of the *epitaphios* in the second half of the fifth century (Lys. 2.7-10; D. 60.8; Pl. *Men.* 239b; Loraux 1986). In the earliest extant reference to the myth—and that depicted by Aeschylus—the Argive king Adrastus brokers the recovery of the bodies and accomplishes the funerary rites for the slain warriors (P. *O.* 6.15-16; *N.* 9.22-4). In Euripides' version, however, the initial negotiation surprisingly takes place between women only. The mothers of the seven, who comprise the chorus, intercept Aethra, the mother of the Theseus, at Eleusis, where she has come to celebrate the Proerosia, and implore her to persuade her son to march against Thebes and recover the bodies.

Despite the unprecedented role Euripides assigns to Aethra in his reshaping of the myth, scant critical attention has been given to her character, nor to the function of the mothers more generally. Scholarly debate has focused instead on questions of dramatic unity and political ideology. Zuntz, the first scholar to fully appreciate the play, barely mentions her, viewing

Aethra as a mediator between "inarticulate longing and the well-defined demands of reason" (Zuntz 1955: 10). Recent interest in gender issues, however, has attracted more interest in her character and the role of women in the play. Both Goff and Foley view Aethra as a figure of moral authority who urges her son to honor ancestral laws regarding burial and supplication. Goff argues that her influence over her son reflects the relative freedom afforded older women in Athenian society (Goff 1995: 71). She further suggests that Aethra's appeal to Theseus is sanctioned by her ritual participation in the Proerosia, an obscure festival connected with the ritual plowing of the land (Goff 1995: 73 and n. 27). Aethra also fits with the pattern of other older mothers in tragedy, such as Hecuba and Jocasta, who act as moral agents urging male characters to obey ancestral laws (Foley 2001: 286). Her motives include pity for the chorus of mothers, concern for Theseus' reputation, and political and religious principles (Foley 2001: 121). Her persuasion of her son represents not a transgression into the world of male politics, as Mendelsohn has argued, but a "critical moral activity" (Foley 2001: 276; Mendelson 2002).

Building on this scholarship, this paper will consider a neglected aspect of the play, the centrality of the mother-son relationship and its social and political implications. I argue that Aethra's authority derives not simply from her piety nor from her status as an older woman, but rather from her willingness to subordinate maternal self-interest to the needs of the city. Her political rhetoric thus should not be viewed as atypical or transgressive, but rather as a reflection of what Loraux has termed the "civic ideology of maternity" that directly linked mothers to the polis through the birth of male offspring after Pericles' citizenship law of 450/1 BCE (Loraux 1998: 12). This ideology is dramatically reinforced at the end of the play when the Epigoni, the orphans of the slain seven, join the chorus of mothers carrying the ashes of their fathers (1168). This rare, mixed gender choral formation affirms the importance of mothers for the polis: their

quest for the bodies of their sons has transcended the private sphere and changed the political landscape of their city, leading to the political alliance between Athens and Argos (1190-95).

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