

Warfare and Society in Ancient Greece

Seminar 2 Empire and tragedy

Euripides' *Suppliant Women* was first performed sometime between 423-420, in the final years of the Archidamic War, the first phase of the Athenian-Spartan conflict. In 424, in the course of a campaign to occupy Boeotia, the Athenian general Demosthenes, after landing too in advance of his colleague Hippocrates and was defeated by the Boeotian at Delium. Upon his arrival, Hippocrates carried out the fortification of the temple of Delium. The work was completed in five days; hence the general left there a garrison, while the rest of his host made return to Athens. Thucydides describes the fortification of Delium as a violation of the laws of the Greeks (item a).

The scene of Euripides' tragedy is set at the temple of Demeter and Chere in Eleusis, in the aftermath of the expedition of the Seven against Thebes. The bodies of the Argive soldiers who had taken part in the campaign are still laying unburied outside the walls of Thebes. The mothers of the unburied, led by Adrastus, king of Argos, have come to Athens to ask king Theseus to aid them in the recovery of the bodies. At first, Theseus denies his support, claiming that the campaign against Thebes had been grounded on ill-advised and impiety (item b), but his mother Aethra persuades him to change his mind, by recalling him his duties as an Athenian (item c). At this point, a Theban messenger arrives, and his encounter with Theseus triggers a debate on the merits and nature of democratic rule (item d). The herald's insistence that the Athenians should not interfere in the affairs of Argos and Thebes leaves Theseus unfussed, and the king decides to fulfil his promise to Adrastus.

After some anxious speculation over the outcome of the expedition (item e), Theseus returns from Thebes having successfully recovered the corpses of the Argives, the king invites Adrastus to join him in a funeral speech to honour the fallen (item f). Then the sons of the dead come on stage carrying urns, vowing revenge upon the Thebans. Finally, as Adrastus and Theseus are bidding farewell to each other, Athena appears and make Adrastus swear an oath of allegiance to Theseus, prophesising the revenge of the sons of the Argives upon Thebes.

In this tragedy, Theseus is explicitly presented as a the representative of the city of Athens and as the mouthpiece for a series of behaviours and principles which, at that time, were tightly linked to Athens' democracy and international role.

Read the following excerpts and try to answer these questions, which will be discussed in the course of the seminar:

1. Do you think that Theseus' early judgement on the Argives' expedition against Thebes is meant to reflect Euripides' judgement on the fortification of Delium (see items a and b)?
2. What do items a and b tell us about the Greek perception of war? Do you think that the two passages are anyhow correlated?
3. What arguments does Aethra use to persuade Theseus to offer support to Adrastus?
4. Replying to the Theban messenger's slander of democratic rule, Theseus says: "What good is it to acquire wealth and livelihood for children, merely to add to the tyrant's substance by one's toil?" What kind of acquired wealth do you think Theseus had in mind?
5. In item e, the chorus calls war a "carnage". Do you think that that implies a moral judgement on institutionalized violence?
6. What virtues are celebrated in the epitaph for the fallen Argives (item f)?



a. Thucydides, 4.97

The Boeotians set up a trophy, took up their own dead, and stripped those of the enemy, and leaving aguard over them retired to Tanagra, there to take measures for attacking Delium.

[2] Meanwhile a herald came from the Athenians to ask for the dead, but was met and turned back by a Boeotian herald, who told him that he would effect nothing until the return of himself the Boeotian herald, and who then went on to the Athenians, and told them on the part of the Boeotians that they had done wrong in transgressing the law of the Hellenes. [3] Of what use was the universal custom protecting the temples in an invaded country if the Athenians were to fortify Delium and live there, acting exactly as if they were on unconsecrated ground, and drawing and using for their purposes the water which they, the Boeotians, never touched except for sacred uses? [4] Accordingly for the god as well as for themselves, in the name of the deities concerned, and of Apollo, the Boeotians invited them first to evacuate the temple, if they wished to take up the dead that belonged to them.

b. Euripides, Suppliant Women 219-231

I think you also are of this number, a son of folly, seeing that you, though obedient to Apollo's oracle in giving your daughters to strangers, as if gods really existed, yet have hurt your house by mingling the stream of its pure line with muddy waters; no! never should the wise man have joined the stock of just and unjust in one, but should have gotten prosperous friends for his family. For the god, confusing their destinies, often destroys by the sufferer's fate his fellow sufferer, who never committed injustice. You led all Argos forth to battle, though seers proclaimed the will of heaven, and then in scorn of them and in violent disregard of the gods have ruined your city, led away by younger men, those who court distinction, and add war to war unrighteously, destroying their fellow-citizens.

c. Euripides, Suppliant Women 286-364

Theseus

Mother, why do you weep, drawing over your eyes your veil? Is it because you heard their piteous lamentations? It goes to my own heart as well. Raise your silvered head, do not weep [290] where you sit at the holy altar of Demeter.

Aethra

Alas!

Theseus

It is not for you to lament their sorrows.

Aethra

You hapless women!

Theseus

You are not of their company.

Aethra

May I say something, my son, a glory to you and to the city?

Theseus

Yes, for often even from women come wise counsels.

Aethra

[295] Yet the word, that lurks within my heart, makes me hesitate.

Theseus

Shame! to hide from friends good counsel.

Aethra

No then, I will not hold my peace to blame myself afterwards for having now kept silence to my shame, nor will I forego my honorable proposal, from the common fear [300] that it is useless for women to give good advice. First, my son, I exhort you to give good heed to heaven's will, lest from slighting it you fall; for in this one single point you fall, though well-advised in all else. Further, I would have patiently endured, had it not been my duty [305] to be bold for injured people; and this, my son, it is that brings you now your honor, and causes me no fear to urge that you should use your

power to make men of violence, who prevent the dead from receiving their share of burial and funeral rites, [310] perform this duty, and check those who would confound the customs of all Hellas; for this it is that holds men's states together—strict observance of the laws. And some, no doubt, will say it was cowardice made you stand aloof in terror, [315] when you might have won for your city a crown of glory, and, though you encountered a savage swine, laboring for a sorry task, yet when the time came for you to face the helmet and pointed spear, and do your best, you were found to be coward. [320] No! do not do so if you are indeed my son. Do you see how fiercely your country looks on its revilers when they mock her for want of counsel? Yes, for in her toils she grows greater. But states whose policy is dark and cautious [325] have their sight darkened by their carefulness. My son, will you not go help the dead and these poor women in their need? I have no fears for you, starting as you do with right upon your side; and although I see the prosperity of Callmus' folk, [330] still I am confident they will hurl a different cast of the dice; for the god reverses all things again.

Chorus Leader

Ah! best of friends, you have pleaded well for me and for Adrastus, and so my joy is doubled.

d. Euripides, Suppliant Women 399-462

Theban Herald

Who is the despot of this land? To whom must I announce [400] the message of Creon who rules over the land of Cadmus, since Eteocles was slain by the hand of his brother Polyneices, at the sevenfold gates of Thebes?

Theseus

You have made a false beginning to your speech, stranger, in seeking a despot here. For this city is not ruled [405] by one man, but is free. The people rule in succession year by year, allowing no preference to wealth, but the poor man shares equally with the rich.

Theban Herald

You give me here an advantage, as in a game of checkers; [410] for the city from which I come is ruled by one man only, not by the mob; no one there puffs up the citizens with specious words, and for his own advantage twists them this way or that, one moment dear to them and lavish of his favors, [415] the next harmful to all; and yet by fresh calumnies of others he hides his former failures and escapes punishment. Besides, how would the people, if it cannot form true judgments, be able rightly to direct the state? No, it is time, not haste, that affords a better [420] understanding. A poor farmer, even if he were not unschooled, would still be unable from his toil to give his mind to politics. Truly the better sort count it no healthy sign when the worthless man obtains a reputation [425] by beguiling with words the populace, though before he was nothing.

Theseus

This herald is a clever fellow, a dabbler in the art of talk. But since you have thus entered the contest with me, listen awhile, for it was you that challenged a discussion. Nothing is more hostile to a city than a despot; [430] where he is, there are first no laws common to all, but one man is tyrant, in whose keeping and in his alone the law resides, and in that case equality is at an end. But when the laws are written down, rich and weak alike have equal justice, [435] and it is open to the weaker to use the same language to the prosperous when he is reviled by him, and the weaker prevails over the stronger if he has justice on his side. Freedom's mark is also seen in this: "Who has wholesome counsel to declare unto the state?" [440] And he who chooses to do so gains renown, while he, who has no wish, remains silent. What greater equality can there be in a city?

Again, where the people are absolute rulers of the land, they rejoice in having a reserve of youthful citizens, while a king counts this a hostile element, [445] and strives to slay the leading men, all such as he thinks discreet, fearing for his power. How then could a city remain stable, where one cuts short all enterprise and mows down the young like meadow-flowers in spring-time? [450] What good is it to acquire wealth and livelihood for children, merely to add to the tyrant's substance by one's toil? Why train up daughters virtuously in our homes to gratify a tyrant's whim, whenever he wishes, and cause tears to those who rear them? May my life end [455] if ever my children are to be wedded by violence!

This bolt I launch in answer to your words. Now say, why have you come? what do you need of this land? If your city had not sent you, to your cost you would have come with your outrageous utterances; for it is the herald's duty [460] to tell the message he is bidden and go back in haste. Henceforth let Creon send to my city some other messenger less talkative than you.

e. Euripides, *Suppliant Women* 598-633

First Semi-Chorus

Unhappy mothers of those hapless chiefs! How wildly in my heart pale fear stirs up alarm!

Second Semi-Chorus

[600] What is this new cry you utter?

First Semi-Chorus

I fear the issue of the strife, where the hosts of Pallas march.

Second Semi-Chorus

Do you speak of issues of the sword, or interchange of words?

First Semi-Chorus

That last would be gain indeed; but if the carnage of battle, fighting, [605] and the noise of beaten breasts again shall be heard in the land, what, alas! will be said of me, who am the cause of it?

Second Semi-Chorus

Yet may fate again bring low the brilliant victor; it is this brave thought that twines about my heart.

First Semi-Chorus

[610] You speak of the gods as if they were just.

Second Semi-Chorus

Yes, for who but they allot whatever happens?

First Semi-Chorus

I see much at variance in their dealings with men.

Second Semi-Chorus

The former fear has warped your judgment. Vengeance calls vengeance forth; slaughter calls for slaughter, [615] but the gods give to mortals respite from affliction, holding in their own hands each thing's allotted end.

First Semi-Chorus

Would I could reach the plains crowned with turrets, leaving Callichorus, fountain of the goddess!

Second Semi-Chorus

[620] O that some god would give you wings!

First Semi-Chorus

So that I might come to the city of two rivers!

Second Semi-Chorus

So might you see and know the fortunes of your friends.

First Semi-Chorus

What fate, what issue there awaits the valiant [625] monarch of this land?

Second Semi-Chorus

Once more do we invoke the gods we called upon before.

First Semi-Chorus

Yes, in our fear this is our chiefest trust.

Second Semi-Chorus

O Zeus, father to the child the heifer-mother bore in days long past, that daughter of Inachus!

First Semi-Chorus

[630] O be gracious, I pray, and champion this city!

Second Semi-Chorus

It is your own darling, your own settler in the city of Argos that I am striving from outrage to rescue for the funeral pyre.

f. Euripides, Suppliant Women 798-

Adrastus

Mothers, raise the wail for the dead departed; [800] cry in answer when you hear my note of woe.

Chorus

My sons! O bitter words for loving mothers to address to you! To you, my lifeless child, I call.

Adrastus

[805] Woe! woe!

Chorus

Ah me, my sufferings!

Adrastus

Alas!

Chorus

...

Adrastus

We have endured—

Chorus

Sorrows most grievous.

Adrastus

O citizens of Argos! do you not behold my fate?

Chorus

They see me also, the hapless mother, [810] bereft of her children.

Adrastus

Bring near the blood-dripping corpses of those hapless men, unworthily slain by unworthy foes, with whom lay the decision of the contest.

Chorus

[815] Let me embrace and hold my children to my bosom in my enfolding arms.

Adrastus

There, there! you have—

Chorus

Sorrows heavy enough to bear.

Adrastus

Alas!

Chorus

Your groans mingle with those of their parents.

Adrastus

[820] Hear me.

Chorus

Over both of us you lament.

Adrastus

Would that the Theban ranks had laid me dead in the dust!

Chorus

Oh that I had never been wedded to a husband!

Adrastus

Ah! hapless mothers, [825] behold this sea of troubles!

Chorus

Our nails have ploughed our cheeks in furrows, and over our heads have we strewn ashes.

Adrastus

Ah me! ah me! Oh that earth's floor would swallow me, [830] or the whirlwind snatch me away, or Zeus's flaming bolt descend upon my head!

Chorus

Bitter the marriages you witnessed, bitter the oracle of Phoebus! [835] The curse of Oedipus, full of sorrow, after desolating his house, has come on you.

Theseus

I meant to question you when you were venting your lamentations to the army, but I will let it pass; yet, though I dropped the matter then [840] and left it alone, I now ask you, Adrastus. Of what lineage sprang those youths, to shine so bright in courage? Tell it to our younger citizens, from your fuller wisdom; for you are skilled to know. I myself beheld their daring deeds, too high for words to tell, [845] by which they thought to capture Thebes. One question I will spare you, lest I provoke your laughter; the foe that each of them encountered in the fray, the spear from which each received his death-wound. These are idle tales alike for those who hear [850] or him who speaks, that any man amid the fray, when clouds of darts are hurtling before his eyes, should declare for certain who each champion is. I could not ask such questions, nor yet believe those who dare assert it; [855] for when a man is face to face with the foe, he could hardly see even that which it is his duty to observe.

Adrastus

Listen then. For in giving this task to me you find a willing eulogist of friends, whose praise I would declare in all truth and sincerity. [860] Do you see that handsome man, transfixed by Zeus's bolt? That is Capaneus; though he had ample wealth, yet he was the last to boast of his prosperity; nor would he ever vaunt himself above a poorer neighbor, but shunned the man whose sumptuous board had puffed him up too high [865] and made him scorn mere competence, for he held that virtue lies not in greedy gluttony, but that moderate means suffice. He was a true friend to his friends, present or absent; of such the number is not great. His was a guileless character, courteous in his speech, [870] that left no promise unperformed either towards his own household or his fellow-citizens. The next I name is Eteoclus, a master of other kinds of excellence; young, lacking in means to live, yet high in honor in the Argive land. [875] And though his friends often offered gifts of gold, he would not have it in his house, to make his character its slave by taking wealth's yoke upon him. Not his city, but those that sinned against her did he hate, for a city is not to be blamed [880] if it should get an evil name by reason of an evil governor.

Such another was Hippomedon, third of this band; from his very boyhood he refrained from turning towards the allurements of the Muses, to lead a life of ease; his home was in the fields, and gladly would he school his nature to hardships [885] with a view to manliness, always hastening to the chase, rejoicing in his steeds or straining his bow, because he would make his body useful to the city. Next behold the huntress Atalanta's son, Parthenopaeus, a youth of peerless beauty; [890] from Arcady he came to the streams of Inachus, and in Argos spent his boyhood. There, when he grew up, first, as is the duty of strangers settled in another land, he showed no pique or jealousy against the state, became no quibbler, chiefest source of annoyance [895] citizen or stranger can give. But he took his stand amid the army, and fought for Argos as he were her own son, glad at heart whenever the city prospered, deeply grieved if ever reverses came. Although he had many lovers among men and women, [900] yet he was careful to avoid offence.

Of Tydeus next the lofty praise I will express in brief; [He was no brilliant spokesman, but a clever craftsman in the art of war, with many a cunning plan.] [Inferior in judgment to his brother Meleager, [905] yet through his warrior skill lending his name to equal praise, for he had found in arms a perfect science;] his was a richly ambitious nature, a spirit equal to deeds, not words. From this account then do not wonder, [910] Theseus, that they dared to die before the towers; for noble nurture carries reverence with it, and every man, when once he has practised virtue, scorns the name of villain. Courage may be learned, for even a baby learns [915] to speak and hear things it cannot comprehend; and whatever someone has learned, this it is his wont to treasure up till he is old. So train up your children in a virtuous way.

Chorus

Alas! my son, to sorrow I brought you up and carried you within my womb, [920] enduring the labor pains; but now Hades takes the fruit of all my hapless toil, and I that bore a son am left, ah me! with no one to nurse my age.

Theseus

[925] As for the noble son of Oecleus, him, while yet he lived, the gods snatched away to the bowels of the earth, and his chariot too, manifestly blessing him; while I myself may truthfully tell the praises of the son of Oedipus, that is, Polyneices, [930] for he was my guest-friend before he left the town of Cadmus and crossed to Argos in voluntary exile. But do you know what I would have you do in this?

Theseus

[925] As for the noble son of Oecleus, him, while yet he lived, the gods snatched away to the bowels of the earth, and his chariot too, manifestly blessing him; while I myself may truthfully tell the praises of the son of Oedipus, that is, Polyneices, [930] for he was my guest-friend before he left the town of Cadmus and crossed to Argos in voluntary exile. But do you know what I would have you do in this?

Adrastus

I know nothing but this—to yield obedience to your commands.

Theseus

As for Capaneus, stricken by the bolt of Zeus—

Adrastus

[935] Will you bury him apart as a consecrated corpse?

Theseus

Yes; but all the rest on one funeral pyre.

Adrastus

Where will you set the tomb apart for him?

Theseus

Here near this temple I have built him a sepulchre.

Adrastus

Your slaves must undertake this toil at once.

Theseus

[940] I myself will look to those others; let the biers advance.

Adrastus

Approach your sons, unhappy mothers.

Theseus

What you propose, Adrastus, is anything but good.

Adrastus

How is that? Must not the mothers touch their sons?

Theseus

It would kill them to see how they are altered.

Adrastus

[945] True, the fresh and bloody wounds of the dead are a bitter sight.

Theseus

Why then will you add to their grief?

Adrastus

You are right. *To the Chorus*, You must patiently abide, for the words of Theseus are good. But when we have committed them to the flames, you shall collect their bones. O wretched sons of men! [950] Why do you get weapons and bring slaughter on one another? Cease from that, give over your toiling, and in mutual peace keep safe your cities. Short is the span of life, so it would be best to run its course as lightly as we may, free from trouble. *The corpses, followed by the children of the slain chieftains, are carried off to the pyre which is kindled within the sight of the persons on the stage.*