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Perverted Performances in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*

Aeschylus' *Suppliants* is the only extant tragedy in which the chorus is the main protagonist. Sommerstein (1996 152-62) has been the most recent scholar to discuss the unusual emphasis in the *Suppliants* on the movements of and interactions between large groups. These features make more sense when we realize that Aeschylus wished to recreate and manipulate the large-scale public performances found in festivals and weddings in order to devise the ironic spectacle of maidens engaging in the types of performance expected of marriageable maidens, while insisting that they don't wish to marry. This stressed the features of the Danaid story already known to the audience, that they brought fertility to Argos, because such performances linked human fertility with agrarian fertility. I will examine some of the variety of choral performances that the Danaids' actions are meant to evoke, continuing the work of Bacon (1995, *Arion Third Series* 3: 6-24) and Calame (1995, *Arion Third Series* 3: 136-154), who have begun the investigation of how the tragic chorus imitated the actions of non-dramatic choruses. In the *Suppliants* the chorus distorts and subverts the typical performance genres performed by and directed at Greek girls looking forward to marriage, refusing to understand their function and message.

I will be examining the four different odes: the *epirrhematikon* with Pelasgus (348-437), the story of Io, which parallels Near Eastern birth incantations (524-99, see Bachvarova 2002 52-65), the song of thanksgiving (625-709) and the exodus, a *kommos* with another chorus concerning marriage (1018-73). This leaves aside the opening ode which sets the context for the play (40-175), the ode portraying the Danaids' fear at the approach of their cousins (736-824) and the fight scene with the herald (836-902). These have been discussed by Seaford (1987) in the light of wedding laments, and their allusions to the themes of birth incantations have been explored by Bachvarova (2002, *NIN* 2: 78-83). In these songs the irony comes from the juxtaposition of the frantic behavior of a woman in labor, alluded to by the motifs and themes typical of birth incantations, with the chorus' hysterical behavior evoking a syndrome afflicting maidens well-known to Aeschylus' audience; this is layered over the behavior expected from lamenting women. The birth themes undercut the maidens' expressed desire to avoid achieving marriage and therefore motherhood. Similarly, there is a disjunction between the Danaids' professed intentions and the traditional message of the other maidenly choral genres alluded to by their lyric performances.

The genres I will discuss are suppliance, not only for sanctuary, but also to promote prosperity, involving a branch-carrying journey, and frequently performed by maidens or even youths costumed as maidens, sometimes with an undercurrent of unpropitiousness (cf. Plutarch *Theseus* 22, Proclus *ap.* Photius 321b 29-30); *agermos* (begging), directed at nubile girls and sometimes carried out by them, involving costuming, a journey and the bearing of an emblem, and meant to promote their fertility, although if the bystander fails to give the demanded gift, she will be punished (cf. Aesch. *Semele*, fr. 168 Radt); *hymenaioi*; and other maidenly choruses, which are meant to be training for girls in

preparation for marriage. These performances provide an opportunity for potential suitors to observe the maidens.