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**Supplication and *Proskunesis* in Euripides' *Orestes***

Scholars have often regarded Euripides' *Orestes* as the darkest of the playwright's works, and as a reflection of the increasing factionalism of late fifth-century Athenian politics (Schein, 1975: 66; Euben 1986: 222 calls it a play about "political corruption"). I will argue that the many instances of supplication are central to understanding this social dysfunction in the play and that the *Orestes* is in many ways an examination of the fragile underpinnings of supplication itself. I draw attention to the way in which three key scenes of supplication or other appeals for *soteria* mark the increasingly violent course of the plot: Orestes' personal supplication of Menelaus (380-469; 632-724), Orestes' plea for pity before the Argive assembly (reported by the messenger at 931-42), and the Phrygian slave's *proskunesis* of Orestes (1506-36). While the assembly speech and *proskunesis* are not supplications in the proper sense of the term (as formulated in Gould 1973 and elsewhere), nevertheless I argue that the play encourages us to read these scenes as a single commentary on the obligations of the powerful to the powerless. The failure of the first two pleas for aid represents a breakdown in such fundamental social values as reciprocity (*charis*), *nomos*, and obligations of *philia*. The Phrygian's *proskunesis*, on the other hand, succeeds because it strips away the pretensions of the earlier scenes and discloses that the only real principles at work in supplication (at least in this play) are the desire of the suppliant to live at all costs and the power of the supplicated to do as he wishes. That Orestes is now the one holding power over another has led many critics to see the Phrygian as a mirror of the Orestes earlier in the play, in which we now see his depravity clearly. I modify this interpretation by showing that the form of the *proskunesis* itself can be seen as a degraded form of the earlier supplication in terms of *nomos*, *philia*, and *charis*. Orestes is openly disdainful of the legitimacy of the Phrygian's barbarian *nomos* in a Greek land (1507), and cruelly tests whether someone so different from himself might also feel fear (1518). Orestes precludes any attempt at flattery, forcing the Phrygian to swear an oath that he not speak of *charis* (1514-6). I agree with Porter 1994:247-50 that Orestes shows his own kind of (troubling) logic here and is not merely depraved; but I add that this logic rests in his 'realist' interpretation of supplication, which views power as unfettered by social obligations.

Finally, I briefly note two contemporary Athenian texts that show how, as in the *Orestes*, a breakdown in supplication was thought to be illustrative of a wider dysfunctional political system. The Corcyrean *stasis* (Thuc. 3.81), for instance, reaches its apogee with the disregard of all proper procedure and the dragging of suppliants from temple sanctuaries. Similarly Philokleon's excursus on supplication (*Wasps* 550-75) reduces the practice to nothing much more than the pleasure of wielding power over others.