



## Aeschylus: Suppliant Women (Classical Texts)

*A. J. Bowen*

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Aeschylus starts his tetralogy boldly, making the Danaids themselves prologue, chorus and protagonist. Guided by their father Danaus, these girls have fled from Egypt, where their cousins want to marry them, to seek asylum in Argos: they claim descent from Io, who was driven to Egypt five generations earlier when Zeus' love for her was detected by jealous Hera. In the long first movement of the play the Danaids argue their claim, pressing it with song and dance of pathos and power, upon the reluctant Argive king. He, forced eventually by their threat of suicide, puts the case to his people, who vote to accept the girls, but while they sing blessings on Argos, Danaus spies their cousins' ships arriving. Left on their own when he goes for help, they sing more seriously of suicide, and seek sanctuary upstage when the Egyptians enter. A remarkable tussle of two choruses ensues; in the nick of time the king arrives, sees off the Egyptians (but they promise a return) and offers his hospitality. The girls want their father, however, and go when guided by him and his escort of Argive soldiers. Their final song has elements of wedding song in it; they share it, provocatively, with the Argives. The rest of the tetralogy is lost, but enough is known to indicate that marriage is the theme. Aeschylus probably surprised his first audience in his use of the myth; his command of theatre and poetry is fully mature. A.J.Bowen is an Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge. From 1993 to 2007 he was Orator of the University.

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