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EDITORIAL:

Europe was herself a refugee

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Europe, no matter how much Europeans forget it, was herself an exile and a refugee. A young Phoenician princess living in Tyre in Lebanon (not far from Syria; that is, the origin of the majority of the most recent refugees arriving to European lands). There in Tyre, Zeus came across Europe, took the shape of a bull, kidnapped her, and carried her forcefully to Crete. In the centuries after, millions and millions of people were driven by force off their ancestral lands. Sometimes from outside Europe, sometimes across Europe, sometimes to outside Europe. Sometimes the force was migration pressures of other populations, sometimes it was expansionist wars, sometimes it was the slave trade, sometimes it was religious turmoil, ideological bias, or racist persecution. Every time the refugees were new embodiments of the mythical Europe and they became the creators of the geographical, political, cultural space we know as Europe today.

Europe might not always remember her mythical past, yet often remembers her own historical experience of the hardship of forced homelessness. A video distributed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees narrates how an 82 year old prisoner, Panagiota Vasileiadou, opened her home and provided hospitality to refugees in Idomeni (a village at the northern borders of Greece where a big number of refugees had gathered in 2015-2016). She recalls:

> I was seven years old when our house was burned down. We

> didn't have a spoon, a fork, bread or clothes. The only thing we had were the nightgowns we were wearing. Five children. No clothes. Nothing.
>
> UNHCR, 2015, 0:55

As long as there are people like this woman, people who maintain either a personal, or a family, or a historical memory of refugeeship, then the political apparatus that runs Europe will always be under a pressure to formulate fundamental European values like those in the Treaty of Lisbon: "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities".

However, one should not think that these values are uncontested within Europe. On the contrary, as Onghena (2015) notes, when the refugees came, there was no strong voice to defend these "European" values, instead

> … what has resulted is an absence of voice, a total silence while other voices make noise, a lot of noise. The xenophobic discourse has established itself, curiously, in countries with rather tolerant pasts −the cases of Sweden and Finland, for example− and has been consolidated in places where extremist populist parties already form part of coalition governments or support minority governments. Their influence on mainstream politics is evident. The threat of the rise of extremist populist parties results in a Europe that is intolerant, xenophobic and racist.

This again is not a new experience for Europe. The co-occurrence of a discourse of humane solidarity and of intolerant xenophobia does not occur now for the first time in history; nor does the suffering of the refugee; nor does the ambivalence of the host. Even particular actions seem to repeat themselves through the centuries.

For example, on February 24, 2016 in a central square in Athens two

refugees attempted to commit suicide by hanging themselves. They made the nooses themselves using their t-shirts and a scarf.[1] Chillingly, this real life situation in the twenty first century AD has strong parallels with a scene from Aeschylus' *Suppliants* (a play produced in the first half of the fifth century BC). A group of women, the Danaids (daughters of Danaus), arrive aat the territory of the Greek city of Argos. Following the instructions of their father, they seek refuge in a temple, and when king Pelasgus arrives, they supplicate him to accept them in the city. When the king hesitates, they threaten to commit suicide:

Danaids ἔχω στρόφους ζώνας τε, συλλαβὰς πέπλων
I have shoulder straps and girdles to gather up my robes.
King τάχ' ἂν γυναιξὶ ταῦτα συμπρεπῆ πέλοι.
Such things are proper, no doubt, for women.
Danaids ἐκ τῶνδε τοίνυν, ἴσθι, μηχανὴ καλή—
In these then, be sure, I have a beautiful instrument—
King λέξον τίν' αὐδὴν τήνδε γηρυθεῖσ' ἔσῃ.
Tell me what speech you plan to utter.
Danaids εἰ μή τι πιστὸν τῷδ' ὑποστήσεις στόλῳ—
If you will not give some pledge to this group—
King τί σοι περαίνει μηχανὴ συζωμάτων;
What will the contrivance of the sashes do for you?
Danaids νέοις πίναξι βρέτεα κοσμῆσαι τάδε.
To adorn these images with tablets of strange sort.
King αἰνιγματῶδες τοὔπος· ἀλλ' ἁπλῶς φράσον.
Your words are riddling; come, explain in simple speech.
Danaids ἐκ τῶνδ' ὅπως τάχιστ' ἀπάγξασθαι θεῶν.
To hang ourselves from the statues of these gods.
King ἤκουσα μαστικτῆρα καρδίας λόγον.
I have heard a word that is a lash upon my heart.

Aeschylus, *Suppliants*, 457–467
(translation adapted from Loeb Classical Library, v. 145)

1 Photographs are available here: http://news247.gr/eidiseis/koinonia/apopeira-aytoktonias-dyo-prosfugwn-sthn-plateia-viktwrias.3926244.html

The similarity between what happened in Athens in 2016 and what was envisaged by an Athenian playwright in around 470 BC is striking. In both cases the refugees use (or threaten to use) their own clothing as the instruments of suicide, in both cases their expression of anguish and desperation can be construed as a threat to the host community, in both cases the rulers feel trapped between unwelcome choices. In the case of the tragedy, the king took the case of the Danaids to the assembly of the citizens, he argued in the assembly to accept the Danaids (and their father) to the city, and the assembly voted unanimously to grant asylum, and when later the pursuers of the Danaids also arrived at Argos and attempted to seize them, the Argives came to the assistance of the Suppliants and got to war against their pursuers.

In outline the play seems to be adopting a stance of solidarity towards refugees so much so that in 2015 Moni Ovadia, himself a migrant from Bulgaria to Italy,

> in staging *The Suppliants* in present-day Sicily, the director's real aim was to enter straight into some of the most urgent concerns of contemporary life. In today's Syracuse, where African refugees beg at traffic lights, he reserved a whole block of seats in the theater for refugee groups to watch the performance
>
> Rowland, 2015

However, as Gray (2015, p. 298) points out unconditional humane aid in Classical Athenian tragedy was limited to children and women (i.e. groups who could not engage in active political activity), and even in these cases was not necessarily wholeheartedly and undeservedly given; although, this fact would not stop the Athenians from priding themselves as disinterested champions of freedom, propriety, and human values.

Actually, the particular play can be read as advancing a xenophobic rhetoric. According to Bakewell (2013, ch. 2-3) the varieties of political speech employed by the Danaids and their father, Danaos, are predicated on violence and deception respectively, in stark contrast with the

speech of persuasion that underpinned the ideology of Athenian democracy. Furthermore, Bakewell argues convincingly, the Danaids view of marriage and their sexual ethics constitute a threat to the family life of the city that receives them. The *Suppliants* is either the first or the second play of a trilogy, the other two plays do not survive for us; however, other sources inform us that as the story progressed King Pelasgos, the one who argued for the acceptance of the Danaids by the city of Argos, was killed possibly as a result of a plot by Danaos who became the ruler of Argos. So, it seems that the play can be read as a warning against providing asylum to refugees, or at least to refugees who do not share the fundamental values and principles of the host community.

Still, it could also be that the meaning of the play may be more complex. One of the reasons given by the Danaids for seeking refuge to Argos is that they are descendants of Io, an Argive princess that Zeus was enamoured with and was persecuted by Hera and transformed to a cow driven to wandering all the way to Egypt. In other words, they do not request asylum as foreigners, but as emigrated locals who are returning home after having lived abroad for several generations, and who claim to share in Argive identity. So, could it be that the play is questioning what really constitutes "identity", and whether any "national body" is as homogeneous in its values and principles as it claims to be? Also, could the play be raising questions regarding the attitude of any particular place towards its own people that itself has exiled in the past?

Without access to the other two plays of the trilogy it will probably be impossible to give a definitive answer. Yet, there have been other times in history when Europe has exiled her own children. One of these instances was the exile of the Sephardim, Spanish Jews forced to leave Spain in the 15th century. **Wen-Yuan Chang** in the first article of this issue examines the versions of *La muerte ocultada* (*The Concealed Death*) preserved by the oral tradition of the Sephardic communities in Morocco, and contrasts them with the versions of the same folk song preserved in Spain. As Chang shows, despite the fact that the Sep-

hardim lived for many centuries outside the Spanish world, they preserved Hispanic culture and language, albeit coloured by the pain of the persecution.

Language is an important issue when an outsider pleads to be accepted in a new community; Aeschylus recognized this issue, and used it as a way of stressing the simultaneous otherness and sameness of the Danaids. In their entrance song they utter in two instances the following lines:

Danaids ἱλεῶμαι μὲν Ἀπίαν βοῦνιν,
I propitiate the Apian hills
καρβᾶνα δ' αὐδὰ v
my foreign speech,
εὖ, γᾶ, κοννεῖς.
Land, you understand well

Aeschylus, *Suppliants*, 117–119 & 128–130
(translation adapted from *Loeb Classical Library*, v. 145)

Although they claim that the land of Argos, metonymically called Apian hills, will understand well their speech, Aeschylus gives them a vocabulary so very rare and archaic[2] as to make it questionable how easily the original audience would be able to understand them. Indeed, Sandin (2003, p. 60) has concluded that the language of this first song is "peculiar, even by Aeschylean standards... perhaps a deliberate means to depict the foreignness of the Danaids."

Language is also an important issue in the acceptance of a refugee population by a host community in our present times. Christoph Merkelbach in our second article takes up this issue and he stresses the importance of making it possible for refugees both to maintain their own language and to learn the language of the host community. His argument goes against a prevailing mentality in most places in Europe where assimilation of refugees is equated with an obliteration of their otherness. Instead he proposes the establishment of a multi-lingual curriculum as

2 The words καρβᾶνα ("foreign") and κοννεῖς ("understand" appears only here and in the lexicographers in the surviving Ancient Greek literature.

much more fitting for a Europe that is, and always was, multi-cultural and diverse.

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Returning to my thoughts on the interpretation of Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, I would like to point out another dimension that complicates even further the picture. The king in Argos is named as Pelasgos, and Pelasgoi was the name of the people living in the land that was subsequently occupied by the Greeks, while in Greek myth Danaos was the ancestor of the royal house of Mycenaeans, and Δαναοί, "Danaans", was in Homer of the names for Greeks. So, is this play about the danger that others are for the receiving communities, or is it a play telling its original audience that they themselves were once the refugee and the other?

Again, we are not in a position to answer the question without more detailed knowledge of the missing plays in the trilogy. However, my question is really meant to draw attention to the matter of how complicated interpretation is, how many details must be taken into consideration, how many questions we should ask ourselves before we can understand what others say and do. Especially so in respect to other cultures or other times. **Michael McGlynn** in the third artcle in this issue takes up exactly this question with reference to the meaning of "exile" in other times and other places. His article examines the concept of exile in medieval Castile, and he finds that "exile" itself should be interpreted, and that different systems of values, in this case systems of law, can regard

it differently; so in contrast to the modern views of exile as an unduly harsh punishment, medieval Castile elites considered it as concomitant of their infighting and as a mechanism that allowed both parties to benefit.

Edward Said reflecting on exile, he concludes with a short list of the positives of the state of being an exile, among them:

> Seeing "the entire world as a foreign land" makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that –to borrow a phrase from music– is *contrapuntal*.
>
> Said (2002, p. 148)

A very good illustration of this point is our concluding article by **Chang-Liang Qu**, who traces the development of Jakobson's concept of "distinctive feature". The article brings into full relief how Jakobson's forced relocation from country to country, and the concomitant compulsion to re-express himself in several languages, contributed towards the development and maturation of a concept that played decisive role in the history of twentieth century linguistics.

Said (2002, p. 145) noted that "exiles…do leaven their environments". We hope that our readers will find this collection as a valuable contribution to this sentiment, and we are planning to expand our input with Issue 7 which is dedicated to the complementary topic "**Immigrants and Diasporas in European Languages and Literatures".**

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