

In the third play of the tetralogy, it is revealed that all of the Danaids, except for Hypermestra, have murdered their husbands. Danaos condemns Hypermestra. Lynkeus, her new husband, intervenes. He saves her, and dethrones Danaos. A trial of the Danaids ends in their reprieve, thanks to the intervention of the goddess of love, Aphrodite.

THE DANAIDS

A re-imagining of Aeschylus' lost play.

By Andrew Wilson

For Juliet

THE DANAID TETRALOGY

III

THE DANAIDS

ἔρᾱι μὲν ἄγνός οὐρανὸς τρῶσαι χθόνα,
ἔρως δὲ γαῖαν λαμβάνει γάμου τυχεῖν·
ὄμβρος δ' ἀπ' εὐνάεντος οὐρανοῦ πεσὼν
ἔκυσε γαῖαν, ἥ δὲ τίκτεται βροτοῖς
μήλων τε βοσκὰς καὶ βίον Δημήτριον
δένδρων τ' ὀπώραν⁷⁴· ἐκ νοτίζοντος γάμου
τέλειός ἐστι· τῶν δ' ἐγὼ παραίτιος.

Aeschylus, Fragment 44 (Page 46)

The Characters

PAMPHILE, nympheutria

CHORUS of DAUGHTERS OF DANAOS

HYPERMESTRA, a daughter of Danaos

DANAOS, King of Libya and Argos

LYNKEUS, surviving son of Aigyptos

POTHOS, Lust, son of Aphrodite

PEITHO, Persuasion, daughter of Aphrodite

ARGIVE ELDERS

MESSENGER

APHRODITE

Protagonist: Danaos, Lynkeus, Peitho,

Deuteragonist: Pamphile, Hypermestra, Pothos, Aphrodite

Text in red is by Aeschylus, fragments 43, 44 and 45

The Scene is the agora in the centre of Argos. The entrance to the royal palace can be seen, centre. It is early morning. A middle-aged woman enters. She is Pamphile, the wedding-planner.

Nympheutria [*entering*]

Last night began so joyously for me.
My name is Pamphile, and I was hired
To supervise the huge, unique, complex
Marriage arrangements for the fifty sons
Of Aigyptos with Danaos' fifty girls.
Quite an assignment! It was such hard work
For me and for my slaves; rewarding too.
To start with all went just as planned.
The boys returned in triumph from the Games,
Where each had won a cousin for his wife.
After the meal, the girls retired to take
Their ritual bath, which I'd seen was prepared
With water from the streams of Inachos.
The boys lingered a little while to drink,
Play party games, and flirt with guitar-girls.
Aigyptiads and Danaids together then
Processed by torchlight to the houses where
The daughters of Danaos had found homes.
The beds for Aphrodite's rites had been
Meticulously made ready by my maids.
My duty was fulfilled when every boy
Was ready on his couch, when every girl,
Washed and perfumed, had come to join her man.
Once all the doors were closed, my night was done.
I am unmarried and had no desire to see
Those things that were not right for me to see.

I could, though, picture in my mind the girls'
Excitement letting down their hair, the boys'
Anticipation of the joys of married love!
The Argive youngsters who last night had sung
The wedding song, escorting them to bed,
Gather next day to sing the morning song
That wakes a couple from their nuptial sleep.
And as the gorgeous sun-light floods the sky,
I with these boys and girls perform the song:
“We come to wake you, don’t be cross with us!”
An old tradition we like to maintain.
But needed, too; these new young masters had
To travel far that day to reach the homes
In Egypt where their wives would learn to serve
Their husbands, as a good wife always does.
Our little choir went first to call on Proteus -
Always so friendly - and Gorgophone,
His newly-wedded wife. We heard no sound.
No shouts of “Go away and let us sleep!”
As we’d expected. Timidly I knocked
And poked my head around the door.
I pray the gods I might unsee that sight.
His lifeless body sprawled there on the couch:
All soaked with blood, which oozed still freely
From the countless wounds that stared like mouths
Or eyes on Argus’ ever-watchful back.
She who had done this loathsome deed was not
Within, no trace of her inside the house.
And soon from other houses where they lodged
Came sounds of screaming as, throughout

Fr.43

The city, every bridegroom was revealed
Dead and alone and butchered by his wife.
Where are the creatures who performed this act?
I cannot call them women, rather they
Must be addressed as she-wolves, vixens,
Hyrceanian tigresses – but there's no crime
Can truly match that of the Danaids.
Alas! I see them coming, like a swarm of wasps,
Flaunting like stings their fatal weaponry! [*Exit hurriedly*]

PARODOS

Enter the **Chorus of Danaids** – terrifying, Fury-like, blood-spattered,
brandishing the lethal hair-pins they used for the murders.

Strophe

They tried to drag me to their ships.
They pulled my hair.
They ripped my veil.
They tore my lovely clothes.
They left me bruised and bleeding.
And then pretended all was well.
They loved us, wanted us so much,
They'd treat us well, as wives not slaves
Once home in Egypt.

Antistrophe

We went along with their pretence
We smiled, we cheered.
We shouted, clapped,
And watched their silly games.
We let ourselves be led away
Grabbed by the arms like captive slaves.

Like cattle led to market.
As torches lit us to the rooms,
We made no protest.

Strophe

And there our rapists lurked,
So smug in victory they assumed was theirs.
They grinned and joked,
Made lewd remarks
And told us "Hurry up,
It's time to get undressed,
Time to surrender maidenhood.
Loosen your hair
Let it flow free
I want to run my fingers through,
To feel its softness."

Antistrophe

I pulled away my veil
I pulled my hairpin out - the hairpin I
had sharpened to
A deadly point -
Our father taught us this.
Then as he spread his arms,
To crush me with his cold embrace,
I moved in close
And felt his breath.
I stabbed him firmly in the chest
Just as instructed.

Strophe

“An upward thrust,
Avoid the ribs!”
Then as he slumped, I struck him in the neck
And for a third time in the back.
Three times as in a sacrifice
Performing due
Libations to the dead.

Antistrophe

It felt so good,
It felt so right.
As his life blood spewed out and showered me
I felt like a parched field newly-sown
Along the raging Nile must feel,
When healing flood
Invades her thirsty soil.

Strophe

The plan of Zeus, our ancestor,
Has been fulfilled.
He saved us when we came to him as refugees
Persuaded Pelasgos
To grant asylum.
He knew his duty to the gods was more important than
The risk of war and ruin to his land.
The god of Justice did not let
A mob of furious rapists undermine his will.
Hera has made us welcome in her land
The land our father Inachos

Appointed hers.

Antistrophe

And Artemis has helped preserve

Our chastity.

Apollo recognised in us his fellow exiles.

He too was on our side.

Even Poseidon

Shepherded us across the sea, safe and secure from storms,

To claim asylum here, in Argive land.

We owe our father heartfelt thanks.

He's always nurtured and protected us.

Never have we once disobeyed his words.

We keep virginity intact

With all our strength.

Strophe

Since cousin marriage was against the law,

He did his utmost to prevent

His nephews losing all restraint

When their lust drove them to

A frantic uncontrolled attempt at rape

To make us theirs by force

And take us home to be their slaves.

Antistrophe

He planned and oversaw our journey here

Arranged our sanctuary and showed

Us how to act like suppliants.

He used persuasive powers

To force the king and all his citizens
To grant us asylum
Willingly and hospitably.

Strophe

And now he's king and he intends
To thwart the base ambition of
His brother Aigyptos,
Who came, pretending to support his sons
In their ill-fated quest,
But really
To claim the throne of Argos for himself.
His sons are dead. And so he must return
To Egypt and admit his evil plan has failed.

Antistrophe

Obedience is a noble thing.
We never faltered in our vow
To do what our father
Decided was the best for us, his girls.
We did what we were told
To get away
From hated marriage to Egyptians!
We fled to Argos to find sanctuary.
We said we would pretend to love those whom we loathed.

Epode

We'd marry them but not forget our hate!
Our father tutored us and showed us how
To make our hairpins sharp and kill the men

Who tried, against the law
And will of Zeus
To conquer us!

Now all we fifty sisters are as one.
We wait to see what father has in store,
His handmaids in his glorious reign
In Argos that has just begun.
Let's all join hands,
Let's dance and celebrate!

They hug, join hands in solidarity and start to dance.

Leader

But wait. We cannot dance just yet. I fear
That one of us is missing. Who is it?
Our sister Hypermestra is not here!
Why is she not with us to celebrate?
I smell a traitor. That girl always was
The odd one out. She wanted things her way.
She quarrelled with our father all the time!

Chorus (*severally*)

- Where is she? Hunt her down?
Search the city, search the town!
- Search the palace. Search the street.
Vital that we find this cheat!
- Search the houses. Search the halls.
Comb the alleys, check the walls.
- What punishment does she deserve?

Death, death, death, death, death!

Strophe

If one cousin, one; one relation, one

Is still alive what happens then?

He goes and joins his father's men?

His father's army on the plain?

They will attack us

Swarm over the walls

And slaughter us all.

He must be found as well as her.

We should have finished up our feast,

Licked all the platters clean:

No leftovers!

Refrain

- Where is she? Hunt her down?

Search the city, search the town!

- Search the palace. Search the street.

Vital that we find this cheat!

- Search the houses. Search the halls.

Comb the alleys, check the walls.

- What punishment does she deserve?

Death, death, death, death, death!

Antistrophe

If one noxious weed, left to grow among

The vegetables escapes the hoe

It could set seed and wreck the crop.

A single pair of mice my breed

Destroy the farmer's
Grain stored for winter,
Food for his family.
She who betrayed us must be found
We cannot let her get away,
She won't get far!

Refrain

- Where is she? Hunt her down?
Search the city, search the town!
- Search the palace. Search the street.
Vital that we find this cheat!
- Search the houses. Search the halls.
Comb the alleys, check the walls.
- What punishment does she deserve?
Death, death, death, death, death!

The chorus go on a rampage looking for their missing sister. Eventually, they notice Danaos has come out and is standing on the palace steps.

They fall silent and calm down.

Danaos

Be calm my daughters. When the storm has passed,
The waves subside, the ship glides into port.
All is quite well. Fear not. I'm in command.
I have the situation well in hand.
The search for Hypermestra's under way.
As soon as she is found she will be brought
Before us here, In chains, to answer to
Her sisters for her treachery – her crime!
I'll be intrigued to hear her try to tell
Us what excuse, what reason lay behind

Her treachery to father, family,
And, worst of all, her sisters' trust in her.
And will she dare attempt to persuade us
That she should not be put to death at once?
For disobedience, and betrayal of
Our cause? Our race, descended from the gods?
The young man, Lynkeus, too, is on the run.
My guards will make quite they capture him
Before he climbs the wall or slips out through
The gates. Once he's arrested he will have
Some difficult questions to answer to.

Suddenly Hypermestra appears, alone.

Hypermestra

Dear father, look no further. Here I am.
No need to comb the city to find me.
I'm here of my free will to tell you why
I took this action. Or why I did not!

Chorus

Why should we care what prompted you
To this betrayal of your friends?
Do you admit that you alone,
The only one of all of us,
Ignored her promise and her oath
And failed to execute the task
That all your sisters were committed to?

Hypermestra

I do indeed. What you did was a crime.
A raging storm of crimes, a massacre

A bloodbath, carnage such that would be seen
As horror on the goriest battlefield.
And in a battle soldiers do not fight
Against an unarmed helpless enemy!
They are allowed to face the foe, and trade
Blow for blow. Not be carved up, in bed,
By one they trusted as they lay relaxed
Awaiting love!

Chorus Leader

This enemy was just pretending to
Be well-disposed to us. For years they planned
To rape us, violate our maidenhood,
Make us their slaves by force. Although
They'd found a cunning way to lull
Us into feeling safe, by feigning love,
To fool us to submit with that charade,
They still were the same monsters who
Had told Egyptian sailors on the beach
To grab us by the hair, rip off our clothes,
Deport us in their ships to be their slaves.
They thought they could achieve the same result
Through guile. We were not fooled for a moment.
Our father's plan to be avenged held firm.
Our sharpened hairpins would ensure not one
Of them would sully our virginity
And drag us meekly back to Egypt's pain.

Danaos

The way you daughters feel is very plain.
Her guilt is obvious. Before you pass
Your sentence, though, allow me by myself

To make my daughter answer for her shame.
You do admit last night you spared the life
Of our enemy you'd sworn that you would kill?

Hypermestra

I do admit I did not kill the man.

Danaos

And did you disregard your father's wish?

Hypermestra

I did. I did not do as I was told.

Danaos

And you betrayed you sisters, who obeyed?

Hypermestra

I did that too. I let my sisters down.

Danaos

How could you dare defy your father's will?

Hypermestra

My father is not fit to tell me what to do.

Danaos

What sort of daughter speaks to me like that!

Hypermestra

One who loves you, but who knows you are wrong.

Danaos

How wrong, to guard my daughters' chastity!

Hypermestra

No need to bring the old excuses out.

Danaos

Excuses? All I did was by command of Zeus.

Hypermestra

Oh no!. My husband has explained it all.

Danaos

Husband? You mean the rat you let escape?

Hypermestra

Lynkeus unravelled all your secret plans.

Danaos

You cannot trust a rapist, or his father who...

Hypermestra

He was the gentlest man I've ever met!

Danaos

Came here to Argos to usurp my throne ...

Hypermestra

A throne you stole persuading Pelasgos ...

Danaos

My brother hates me and he wants me dead!

Hypermestra

He'd anger Zeus unless he chose to fight.

Danaos

It's true, Zeus did protect you suppliants!

Hypermestra

Your perfidy and lies are now exposed.

Danaos

My other daughters **hold you in contempt.**

POxy 5160 II 37-40

Hypermestra

Give them the pleasure. Sentence me to death!

Danaos

I pass the sentence. Hear how they applaud!

Hypermestra

The god of Justice, Themis, knows the truth.

Danaos

Escort her to the wall, and throw her off!

Hypermestra

Have you no fear the gods will punish you?

Danaos

Let's hope my brother witnesses her fall.

Hypermetra

Beware the wrath of Virgin Artemis.

Danaos

Take her. A girl who broke her father's heart.

Guards pinion her arms, and march her off. Danaus follows with the rest of his bodyguard.

Chorus

Strophe

Artemis, mistress of the animals.

Twin sister to Apollo

We honour you respect you.

We worship you,

Our immortal inspiration,

We love you.

You treasure your virginity,

Avoiding company of gods and mortal men,

Escaping to the cool and shady

Darkness of the forest trees

Alone, or with a handful of

your faithful nymphs.

Antistrophe

Leto, your mother, and Apollo's too,

Was of the ancient race of gods,

Like Io she was hounded,

Like so many

Goddesses and mortal women,
By Hera.
At last she found a place to have
Her twin babies, securely, safely in Delos
Island floating in the ocean,
There she brought her twins to birth
Alone in fearful agony,
Unbearable pain.

Strophe

Artemis
Begged to be excused from
Stabbing, burning, aching, searing pain
Of bearing a child.
She was allowed to grow to
Womanhood without the need
To lie beside a man,
The need to be a slave
To any man – or god.
And so it was.

Antistrophe

Her father Zeus,
Recognising her mother's
Bitter struggle to reach motherhood,
Granted her wish.
She was to be free to roam
The woods, and give protection
To the weak and vulnerable
Creatures of the wild,

And shield her fellow-virgins
If she could.

Strophe

A son of Earth, a giant,
Mountain of male pride
Glorying in his maleness
Flaunting his pride.
So huge was he, so it was told
His mother died in bringing him to life
Her womb could not contain
The enormous burden. It killed her,
But the aborted Titan
Was taken in by Gaia, Earth,
Who in due season brought him forth.

Antistrophe

This corpulent grotesque
Imposed himself on Leto
Artemis' sad mother.
He thrust her down,
He raped her, goddess, mother,
As she was on the way to see her son,
He tore her lovely flesh.
He crushed her body's resistance
He violated her
Polluted her. He dragged her down
And mangled her defenceless limbs.

Strophe

His name was Tityos,
A Titan, lumbering, immense.
Their mother's screams
Were heard around the world.
Apollo from his new-found home
Below Parnassus' crags
Heard her, as did his sister
Bathing in a forest pool on
Mount Kithairon's wooded slopes.

Antistrophe

Both twins alike were skilled,
Expert killers with the bow.
They rushed to help,
And shot the monster down.
Each launched a steady quiver-full.
The beast was duly stopped.
He could not die, but he was
Buried In the deepest pit
Of Tartarus. And there he lies.

Epode

There two immortal vultures peck at him,
One either side. They rip his liver out
in gobbets oozing blood.
He tries to beat them off, but they return
Again. The feast is never over. Since
Enough regenerates each day to glut
The greedy maws of carrion birds.

Lynkeus enters from the palace, with soldiers from the Argive army. The chorus make a move to escape.

Lynkeus

You blood-stained creatures, stay right where you are!

Sisters-in-law I might have called you, had

Last night turned out as I foresaw. Instead

I'm forced to face a mob of killers. Troop

Of Furies, smeared with blood my brothers spilled.

You howled with joy when Hypermestra who,

You judged, betrayed you, was led off to die,

Hurled from the watchtower by rough hands,

Her gentle body smashed to pieces on the rocks.

Bad news for you. She is not dead. We stopped

The soldiers marching her to death. She's safe!

She's being comforted by Argive girls.

What of my uncle, and your father, Danaos,

Who found self-righteous pleasure being king,

When as he thought, his dreams had all come true?

Bad news, again! That man is king no more.

The Argives chose him yesterday. Today

They clearly know his evil schemes and see

His proven guilt, as an accessory

To brutal murder: how he stole his throne,

And hoped to keep it, through a massacre.

Well, I'm now king. The Argives have elected me.

Danaos has been stripped of all his rank.

Alas, he is not here to answer for his crimes:

The story is he's got away, he's fled,

He'll try to find a ship to take him back

To Libya. Not much chance of that, I hope.

I have sent men to hunt him down, put him

In chains, and bring him here for trial.
Aigyptos is distraught, and meekly waits
To see the bodies of his murdered sons
Then take them home for burial by the Nile.
His sons! My brothers! Losing in one day
So many friends; so many lives cut short.
A pain that will be with us all our lives.
The two of us, my father and myself,
Must on our own bear all the grief, there is
No one to share the horror of this day.

Chorus

Is that your speech, you viper, crawling snake?
How dare you stride about pretending to be king?
I see now how you must have overpowered
Our sister, or prevented her by force
From acting as she promised to. Perhaps
We judged her prematurely, she was not,
A woman, built to wrestle with a man!

Lynkeus

You're wrong in every way. Let me explain.
I watched your sister Hypermestra as
She grew to womanhood. I longed to talk,
To get to know her! And as I grew up,
Although to meet her was now disallowed,
I found my boyish crush had turned to love.
How overwhelmed I was to win the race
And claim her as my glorious prize! I prayed
That she might come to feel, somehow, the same
For me. I led her home. My anxious heart
Was thumping like a drum. As I lay still

Upon the couch, she quietly slid herself
In there beside me. Then she let her hair
Fall loose. She had the pin there in her hand.
I smiled. She smiled. "I am supposed to use
This as a weapon now, to stab you through
The heart! That's what our father said we had
To do, or else we would be dragged away
To be enslaved in Egypt, raped, defiled!"
She put the weapon down and kissed me gently.
As we embraced, I told her all I knew
About my father's and my uncle's fight,
How he had smugly crowed that in his game
You girls were all just pieces which he moved!
And then the screams of agony began:
Her sisters' shouts of triumph clashed
Discordantly with brothers' screams of pain.
She told me I must go at once, and showed
The secret way for us to find the quarters
Where the Argive soldiers slept. "There's been
A massacre," we said. In terror, they
Agreed to follow my commands. I could
Not, though, prevent my wife from rushing out
To face her father and her sisters. I
Observed, in secret, as they questioned her;
I shuddered seeing her condemned. Then when
The time was ripe, as they dragged her away,
I led the army into action in the square,
To stop the madness and rescue my queen!

Chorus

What will you do with us? Will we be killed?

We had a plan to die, to hang ourselves,
Before accepting marriage with these brutes.
But with them dead, would you now dare to have
Us killed? Our father surely will return,
Once he has summoned allies, as he did before.
We are your own wife's sisters! Will you slaughter us?

Lynkeus

No fear of that. The citizens of Argos don't
Permit their king to make decisions on his own.
They hold assemblies and discuss among
Themselves the best, the wisest thing to do.
As I have heard, they voted once to give
Asylum to you girls – persuaded by the lies
Your wretched father made them all believe.
And so, I promise there will be a trial,
Fair and unbiased. There will be a judge
And advocates for prosecution and defence.
Twelve Argive senators will listen to
The arguments each side presents. Each man
Will clearly state his own opinion, then,
As is the custom here, they will decide
Amongst themselves the verdict of them all.

Chorus

But citizens may hate us for our looks,
Or else a bribe may tempt them, or they may
Be frightened by armed men who answer to
The king, whose brothers we admit we slew.

Lynkeus

Then fear no more. I go to pray to ask
Some god who may have witnessed what occurred,

To come down from Olympus and preside,
To see that justice truly will be done.
My brothers can't attend to testify:
The sisters don't deny they did the deed.
Except the gods, no one can see into
The hearts of men. We know the barest facts.
Who died. Who killed them. But to find out why,
We need the power of Zeus, as he alone
Sees all, hears all, knows all that mortals do.
Our worthy men of Argos will decide
The verdict once they've listened to
The evidence only the gods can give.
My wife, Hypermestra, and I, will stand
Aside. O Zeus, father of us all,
Send us a god to supervise this trial!
Only immortal power can show due care
For justice, and ensure that all is fair. *[Exit]*

Chorus

Strophe

What does this mean?
The citizens of Argos will decide our fate?
What novel thing is this?
The people in command?
This is acknowledged folly.
A mob of unknown, ignoble, persons
Perform the task a king should do?
A king must make decisions on his own!

Antistrophe

The gods give their
Allegiance to a single king, to Zeus alone.
His mind is hard to read,
Decisions hard to guess.
But the result is justice.
All the power is his! The other immortals
Even his wife, as well we know,
Are forced to yield, submit to his commands.

Strophe

A ruler owns his kingdom: it is his.
Just as the master of the house
Owns and controls his family.
It is his to order as he please.
No need to use persuasive talk -
He decides and it is done!
Justice is tempered to his will -
The law of Zeus.

Antistrophe

Does any general ask his troops to give
Advice before he leads them out,
Whether to victory or defeat?
One oar, one helmsman steers the ship,
When winter's lightning strikes the mast,
To harbour or onto the rocks.
And, in the state, one man commands:
His word is law.

Strophe

What **of** the gods? Do they condemn obedience?
To Danaos, our father? To disobey Zeus
Earns punishment, which may be swift -
A thunderbolt from heaven.
Or, with more pain, prolonged,
Like poor Prometheus.

Antistrophe

All we can do is pray to Zeus the saviour,
Great Zeus from whom we are descended
Who rescued Io from her torment
And fathered Epaphos with a gentle touch.
My he be gentle now to us,
As once to Io.

Epode

Always our father has controlled our lives.
He's always been there with instructions and advice
If only he were here today
To tell us what to do.
What will the court decide?
Return us to our uncle's wrath in Egypt?
An execution here in Argos?
Or set us loose to wander homeless
Through the cold unfriendly countryside of Greece,
Once more in search of sanctuary?

Chorus

We pray to avoid the fate of Sisyphus,
Death as a punishment was not enough

For him. For life is brief, but death can have
No end. For all eternity he rolls his rock
Not quite far up enough before it rolls
Wantonly back again. In Tartarus,
The deepest, darkest, pit of Hades' realm
Ixion who offended Zeus rotates
For ever on his wheel. And Tantalus,
As I heard someone tell, stands tortured by
Unsatiated thirst, and hunger, all amid
The choicest treats for ever out of reach.
I fear our crimes may be as black as theirs.
Such punishment would be too hard to bear.
We pray that death, and only death, be ours.
We have prayed many times for death to come
A destiny we freely chose before
Abject surrender to our cousins' lust.

During the choral song, the court has been set up. Soldiers are now guarding the Danaids, who have been made to sit in a semicircle in the orchestra, facing the stage. At the back of the stage, facing the audience, are the elders of the Argive senate. Upstage centre, a richly-decorated (poikilos) throne, empty for the moment.

*Two divinities appear. They are children of Aphrodite: a young man, conceivably winged, **Pothos (Desire)**, and his perhaps rather older sister, **Peitho (Persuasion)**.*

The Danaids and the Senators stand, fixated. Maybe a fanfare. The throne remains empty.

Pothos

Be seated all. My mother, Golden-haired
Aphrodite, goddess of smiles and laughter,
Was making an appearance in Paphos,
To the delight of all her worshippers,

There, on the spot she first set foot on land,
When uncle Hermes, wingèd hat and all,
Appeared from nowhere, and caused panic, as
He tends to do. He had, she knew, been sent
By Zeus, my grandfather: his daughter was
Required to sit in judgment on some mortal thing.
As the affair concerned her interests -
A lover's tiff on a gigantic scale -
Despite the pleasant dalliance that she
Was currently engaged in, she, my sister
And myself were soon *en route* for Argos.
Here we, my mother and the two of us
Are tasked with bringing justice to this - mess.
My name is Pothos - Lust, Desire. I make
Men mad with love - and women too, that is
My role - to do whatever "she" directs.
All living creatures need to feel my power,
Or else the world would be an empty plot,
No calves, no fluffy lambs, no chicks, no cats
No puppies and no puking, squawking brats.

Peitho

My name is Peitho, cool Persuasiveness.
My brother is the hot, rough, thoughtless type;
His task is simple - to ensure that all
The world feels sexual desire, the urge to mate.
My task, Persuasion, needs a subtler touch:
Encouraging male and female to join
Together peaceably, finding a match
Through flirting, talk, seduction, courtesy.
Without me, there'd be only savagery and rape.

Persuasion makes sure unions take place
With sweetness, mutual harmony – and love.

Pothos

I, Pothos, willingly take on the role
Of prosecutor, keen to prove these girls
Are guilty, murderesses, criminals
Who angered Aphrodite, spurning love,
Thwarting their cousins' natural desires.
Who rather than submit to sex, ran off,
Pretended then to change their minds,
But even in the marriage bed, they still
Refused their husbands, and preferred to kill
Them callously, like cowards, in cold blood.

Peitho

And I shall demonstrate the part Persuasion
Played in this grim tragedy. How Aigyptos'
Crude gang of thugs ignored the need to be
Tender, protective, to their brides-to-be.
They frightened them with threatening words,
That made them fear marriage would be a form
Of slavery – their bodies owned by men.
As males they thought they had a natural right
To sexual conquest, smug and arrogant.
Although their fathers had arranged that they,
Both sets of cousins, should become betrothed,
The daughters saw brute force and violence,
No kindness, gentleness or tender love.

Pothos

No more preamble. I intend to move
At once to start the prosecution's case.

Tell me you girls. You all are sisters, yes?

All forty-nine are daughters of one man,

Danaos, am I right in what I say?

Chorus

Danaos is the father whom we love.

Pothos

Do you obey your father's wishes faithfully?

Chorus

Of course. We'd never disobey his words.

Pothos

What of your mothers. They obeyed him too?

Chorus

He made sure they complied with his demands.

Pothos

And did your mothers have command of you?

Chorus

Our mothers did. We'd not dare defy them.

Pothos

Your father told you to reject marriage.

Chorus

Make sure to cherish our virginity!

Pothos

And did your mothers go along with this?

Chorus

They could not go against their husband's wish.

Pothos

Who gave so much authority to men?

Chorus

Great Zeus, of course, ruler of gods and men.

Pothos

What led you to look for asylum **here**?

Chorus

Io, our ancestor, was Argive born.

Pothos

Who was the male? The father of her child?

Chorus

Zeus, with his touch, as everybody knows!

Pothos

What made him choose to fall in love with **her**?

Chorus

Aphrodite, whom no one can escape.

Pothos

So, Zeus could not escape the power of love?

Chorus

Quite so. Through Zeus our family exists!

Pothos

There is, that means, a stronger god than Zeus?

Chorus

It seems that Aphrodite has more power.

Pothos

Then was your father, when he shielded you...

Chorus

He only ever wanted what was best!

Pothos

...Defying Aphrodite, scorning her?

Chorus

He was afraid some harm would come to him.

Pothos

So fear made him insult the power of love?

Chorus

Insulting Aphrodite was, I see, quite wrong.

Pothos

Then were you wrong to do what father said?

Chorus

It is not right that women disobey a man.

Pothos

The sin was his, and he caused you to sin.

Chorus

So are we innocent, freed from the charge?

Pothos

You did the deed. That cannot be excused.

Your father will account for his mistakes.

You girls must honour Aphrodite now!

If you show her respect, she may decide

Although you're guilty, that she's on your side.

Pothos disappears

Peitho

The Danaids had no alternative

But to obey their father. Persuasion's

A thing they've no acquaintance with!

Aigyptos' sons, just like their uncle, did

Not seek to use persuasion to obtain

Their goal. But they cannot attend, for me

To cross-examine in the girls' defence...

Hypermestra suddenly appears from the palace

Hypermestra

I have decided to approach the court
To volunteer as witness for defence!
This make come as a shock, a strange surprise,
Since only now my sisters cheered when I
Was led off to my death. But now I'm safe,
I'd like to do them good by telling what
I have learned so far from all our suffering,
And from my talk just now, indoors, with my
Beloved husband! You, my sisters, did
The deed, you were too hasty to complete
Our father's deadly scheme, the latest act
In that long-running feud between his twin
And him. And now they both have lost.
You murdered without thought those sad
Young men – denied them chance to show their love.

Peitho

The young men **were** to blame, though not as much.
They failed to worship Aphrodite as
They should – they only cared for half of that
Which Love demands. Lust and desire they knew,
But love without persuasion too is crude
And violent: lust needs restraint. They had
Not learned the subtler part of love:
To flirt, to woo – the arts of courtship and
Seduction's sweetness. Pothos drove them on,
But Peitho's moderation they ignored.

Hypermestra

Let me explain what happened on the night
When we retired with murder on our mind.
You sisters all believe I let you down,

Betrayed you, as the only one who balked
At carrying out the savage deed as was
Agreed, complying with our father's grim
Command. It was not cowardice, but when
Lynkeus looked straight into my eyes, and smiled
So sweetly and so gently, and began
To tease me, make me laugh, I realised
This was no monster out to rape, to steal
My chastity! As you have heard just now,
There are two sides to Aphrodite. We
Had been misled by Danaos's talk
Of rough and violent masculinity.
He stopped us learning of Love's softer side,
The gifts of Peitho. So we never gave
The boys a chance to use persuasiveness,
To win our hearts as Aphrodite wants.
My husband – how I love to use that word –
Explained how all his brothers had
Neglected Aphrodite, too, scorning
Rituals of courtship in their rush to bed,
And thought they could just commandeer their brides.
They acted roughly out of ignorance
How Aphrodite wanted love to be.
And love is for a purpose! Never once
Did Danaos consider how his daughters felt,
Denied the joys of motherhood. My sisters,
You may have been content to keep yourselves
Intact to save your father's life. But I,
Though at the time I loved him too, grieved much
Alone, deprived a chance to bear a child.

You all committed murder, that is fact.
But both the sets of cousins, in their way,
Offended Aphrodite, goddess who's
Easiest to enrage, the hardest to appease.
Those who insult her pay a dreadful price.
I hope her judgment will not be too grim.
Lynkeus, my l husband waits. I go to him. *[Exit]*

Peitho

Senators, elders of Argos,
You've listened to the arguments. So now
Reveal your mind; say if you find
The Danaids guilty for their cousins' deaths.
My task is done. The decision is for you
And you alone without the aid of gods!

The goddess departs. The foreman introduces the task of delivering the verdict.

Leader of the elders of Argos

I am an old man honoured to be tasked
With passing judgment in this tragic case.
Never has Argos witnessed such a crime
Not in my father's nor grandfather's time.
I'm proud to be entrusted by the new
Young king with this responsibility.
Even the very old can have some use!
Although this role, I think, would be more fit
For younger men. We tend to get confused.
These arguments are hard to understand.
Nevertheless, **I shrug off my old age,**

Fr. 45

To help reach a decision on these girls.

We will give our opinions one by one.

One by one the elders step forward to deliver their opinion.

First senator

For men to be robbed of their precious lives

At womens' murderous hands is very wrong.

I find them guilty of the charge.

Second Senator

An immigrant who's welcomed to our land

Should not abuse our hospitality.

I find them guilty of the charge

Third Senator

To follow orders blindly without thought

Reveals a mind that's not averse to crime.

I find them guilty of the charge.

Fourth Senator

They came prepared to murder in cold blood.

A crime premeditated, not a sudden rage.

I find them guilty of the charge.

Fifth Senator

Their weapons were concealed, adding a foul

And cruel deception to a heinous act

I find them guilty of the charge.

Sixth Senator

A woman who purposely kills a man
Commits the most unnatural of crimes.
I find them guilty of the charge.

Seventh Senator

These girls' behaviour sets a precedent
Which could inspire our Argive girls to crime!
I find them guilty of the charge.

Eighth Senator

This swarm of serpents , hateful immigrants
Defile our land, their crimes black as their skin.
I find them guilty of the charge.

Ninth Senator

They killed their cousins, their own family!
For shame! The blood they shed was kindred blood.
I find them guilty of the charge.

Tenth senator

I hate these strangers and their foreign clothes.
They should go home and do their murders there.
I find them guilty of the charge.

Eleventh Senator

Our king Pelasgos died defending them.
They are to blame for sending him to death.
I find them guilty of the charge.

Twelfth Senator

The one who does a violent act must pay:
That is the law of Zeus, which we uphold.
I find them guilty of the charge.

Chorus

Strophe

Then we are guilty, damned,
Condemned by foreigners
Whose bigotry was clear.
Our race, our looks, our dress
Caused jurymen offence!
What fate awaits us now?
Despite obedience to
Our father's principles.
(No woman is allowed
To flout a man's command!)
The law finds us condemned
For listening to a man
As every woman should!
We know it was not right

Antistrophe

To disregard, to scorn
The unyielding goddess
The golden Cyprian.
But what were we to do –
To honour one's parents
Is a command of Zeus:
To show respect to Zeus,

We found ourselves compelled
To disrespect Love's power.
What should we then have done?
Is Zeus the supreme god
Or is it Aphrodite?
On how to answer that
It seems our lives depend.

Our father will have sound advice.
Throughout our lives he's been our guide.
He organised our flight from home.
He found, some say he built, designed,
The trusty ship that brought us here.
He found for us, as strangers here
Asylum in a sacred grove
Protected by the Olympian gods,
While he sought help from Argos' king,
And convinced the Pelasgians
To save us, even at the cost
Of war with Egypt over us.
He did not see our skin, our clothes,
As reasons to reject our claim.
I feel Danaos is quite near.
He will have found a friendly king
To lend his forces, help him back.
May he come soon and take control.
Protect his fearful daughters who
Did only what he told them to.

A messenger runs in.

Messenger

Where are the daughters of the Libyan king?
Danaos' daughters? I have news for them.

Chorus

Then look no more. We are the Danaids.

Messenger

Prepare to weep, sad creatures, tear your hair!

Chorus

Our lives are wretched, what could make them worse?

Messenger

Your father's dead. A death unfitting for a king.

Chorus

Aiai!

We have no hope of rescue now. It's done.
These local worthies will proceed forthwith
To plan our death. Pray it be swift!
But tell us, while we live and see the light,
How did our father die? Was he in pain?

Messenger

Danaos with his bodyguard was headed for
The coast, where he might find a boat to take
Him home to Libya, or at least somewhere
Remote and safe from Aigyptos' revenge.
He reached Asine. There's a castle there
He thought was owned by friends. But no.
They barred the gates and threatened him with death.
Your noble father scorned these threats, and told
His men "We shall attack, then! Follow me!!
He led the charge, but found his men had turned

Their backs, and run away, left him to fight alone.
I am ashamed to say that I was one
Who fled – as men of Argos it seemed wrong
To serve an outcast. But I changed my mind,
From loyalty, and so I came to see
The wretched drama which I now report.
Without his bodyguard, he stood no chance.
He found a shepherd's hut to spend the night.
The shepherd was a humble man, and gave
Him milk and cheese, a bed. Next day, unknowing,
The shepherd took a pair of lambs, as he'd
Been ordered, to the castle. He could not
Resist describing who he'd entertained.
“Was he a dark-skinned man dressed like a king?”
His answer told the king of Asine
It was Danaos. “This I order you
To do on pain of death. Go home at once
And cut his head off, or I shall cut yours
Off here and now!” The shepherd, terrified,
Planned he would warn Danaos, but a troop
Of horsemen followed to ensure he would
Comply. Trembling and pale with mortal fear,
He moved close up to Danaos, as if
He had a vital secret to impart,
Out of the earshot of the soldiery.
He slipped his knife beneath your father's ribs.
It found his heart, and there he lost his life.
So died a man for whom one continent
Was not enough: he had his Libyan realm ,
But yearned to add Pelasgia to his

Domains. Ambition was his fatal sin:
A madness to possess more than his twin.

Chorus

We thank you for your bravery in coming here.
The way he died did not befit a king.
But he was killed, not by a son-in-law,
Not by a daughter's husband! No! He died
Not as the oracle foretold, an oracle
He claimed was Ammon's from Egyptian Zeus!
Zeus does not lie: always what he foretells
Becomes a fact. And Danaos was killed
By some rustic nobody, far from home,
Unless that shepherd was a long-lost son
Of Aigyptos – a man who never left his home
In Egypt till three days ago! Our father lied!
I realise how he made fools of us
To further his insane imperial dreams!
We never should have scorned our cousins' love!
We slighted Aphrodite, and for what?
We murdered those we should have loved, to serve
Our father's crooked plan. He lied, and then
He lied again – nothing he said was true.
O how I hate him, how I hate the way
We showed him such respect, hung on
His every word! What fools, what stupid fools!

A Senator

Enough, no more delay. No more excuses.
Our verdicts have already been declared:
All twelve of us with but a single mind.
Guilty of murdering your cousins, crime

Unnatural: against the state, against
The family, against all womankind.
We now confer before we sentence you.

They confer briefly

Again, our sentence was unanimous.
Death is the sentence that we pass on you.
To minimise pollution of our town,
You will be led outside the walls, and put
To death. Your blood pays for the blood you shed.
Argos decrees that all these wicked ladies
Must expiate their dreadful crime in Hades.

*Soldiers move to round up the Danaids to march them off to the place
execution. Suddenly a golden chariot pulled by sparrows appears above the
palace. A resplendent **Aphrodite** steps forth and takes her seat upon the
throne. **Pothos (non-speaking)** and **Peitho** reappear on either side of
her.*

Peitho

Stay where you are. Release the girls. Stand back.
You daughters of Danaus, take your seats.
Our golden mother Aphrodite now descends
To divulge what the gods intend for you.
Your crime has caused her very much concern.

Aphrodite

You recognise me. You all know my name.
You think you know me. You do not know me.
I am a goddess. That at least you know.
Who is my father? Some say it is Zeus.

I let them call me Zeus's child, but he
Is not my parent. If he were, I would
Be under his authority, which I am not.
My power is greater than the gods' by far.
My proper title is Ourania,
The Heavenly, the Cosmic Overseer.
For all the universe is powered by Love.

The sacred sky is mad with love and longs
To violate the virgin earth, the earth in turn
Wants desperately to feel herself possessed,
A wedded copulation. Then the rain
Falls, spray from gushing springs in heaven,
To impregnate the earth, and she gives birth
To pasture for the herds that feed mankind,
To grain that sustains life, to fruiting trees.
Togetherness and moisture make all this
Occur. I am responsible, in charge.

Fr.44

Zeus, too, has weighty matters in his brief:
Justice, protection of the vulnerable:
Asylum seekers, refugees, and guests
And strangers in a foreign land. But I
Have charge of life itself. Without my power
The world would not be peopled, there
Would be no animals to hunt, to ride, to milk!
No birds to trap, no fish to net, no trees
To give you fruit, no vines, no fields, to bear
The crops Demeter tends and nourishes.

You girls are victims of a wicked man's deceit,
You trusted him, believed him, all your life.

You were in thrall to his authority so far,
You did not shrink when told to take the lives
Of men you had that day been married to.
You thought obedience to parents showed
Your love. You were mistaken, no, misled.
Love is when union leads to fruitfulness:
The love that comes from Aphrodite: that
Occurs when living things unite in ecstasy,
When male and female bond in mutual joy.

The Danaids did take their cousins' lives.
They angered me, as did their cousins too.
Death is the one god I cannot control
He took Persephone, Demeter's child
Imprisoned her in his dark loveless world.
I do not wish to add to his delight
By sending souls to him before their time.
My power is on the side of Life, not Death.
I give them back their lives, provided they
Respect me and devote themselves to love.
Go forth, choose husbands, settle here
In this Pelasgian land. You shall have sons
And daughters, proud Danaans, who will be
The founders of a race of warriors
Whose fame shall live in tales for evermore.

Your future lives, Danaids, I decree
Shall be as married women, settled wives.
Lest you forget how much you hated sex,
I'll have you institute a festival,

Where every spring the married ladies in
The city will reject their wifely roles,
For three whole days. They will depart as one
And live together underneath the stars.
Their rituals and prescribed activities
I'll not disclose. Nor must a woman ever
Speak word of them to any man. There is
A sacrifice you must perform – and this
Is the one rite that won't be hid from men.
In memory of your slaughtered husbands, and
The blood you shed, you'll kill some fine young pigs
And throw them in a pit. After a year
Retrieve the bodies, which, mixed with seed corn
Will make the grain grow tall and rich. By this
You honour Demeter, whose daughter must
Each autumn leave the fruitful lands above
And join her snatcher, **Zagreus**, Prince of Hell, **cf Fr**
Confined in dismal darkness until spring.
When winter ends, the seeds burst into life,
And so both Earth and Sky rejoice once more.

This festival has been long years observed
In Egypt. I have chosen you to bring
It here to Argos and Pelasgia.
It shall be called the Thesmophoria,
In honour of Demeter and Persephone,
Consoling mother for the daughter's loss.
For King Pelasgos gave a welcome to
Demeter as she desperately sought
Her daughter ravished without love.

Lynkeus and Hypermestra appear from the palace.

Lynkeus, new king of Argos, and his queen
Hypermestra will lead the way. Depart!
Go forth and find new husbands for yourselves!
I now return to lovely Paphos on the isle
Of Cyprus, land where my mysterious birth
Is celebrated: where I made my home,
Where I emerged, once, damp from the sea-foam.

Chorus – Exodos

We praise you , Aphrodite, Queen
Of Heaven, Mistress of the Earth.
At length we recognise Love is supreme,
A greater power than Zeus himself,
A power that he himself respects.
The female rules, and not the male!
As Hypermestra and her man
Now lead the way, we follow on.
We plan to choose our husbands - and
We trust we shall find men to share
Our lives in glorious harmony.
For Harmony is daughter of
Great Aphrodite, who rejoices when
A man and woman join as one.

*The chorus move out through the theatre, selecting men as husbands.
Perhaps they bring them back into the orchestra for a celebratory dance!*

AMW Marshfield May 12 2020 (day after my 81st birthday!)

