

SUCCESSFUL BIRTH, UNSUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE:
AESCHYLUS' SUPPLIANTS AND MESOPOTAMIAN
BIRTH INCANTATIONS

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1. *Introduction*

Aeschylus' tragedy, the *Suppliants*, tells the story of the fifty Danaids who try to escape unwanted marriage to their cousins, the Egyptians. They demand the protection of Argos, the home of their ancestress Io. Having fled by boat from Egypt to Argos, their cousins in hot pursuit, they place themselves in the city temple as suppliants, appealing to king Pelasgus. To prove their connection to Argos and their right to ask for help both from Pelasgus and from Zeus, the Danaid maidens tell the story of Io, the cow maiden ravished by Zeus, tormented by Hera's gadfly, and finally brought to birth by the healing touch of her lover to stand at the head of a line of Greek heroes. Yet, the maidens don't realize that Io's story works against them; its moral is that no matter how unpleasant the thought of their impending marriage, women should accept their lot, for they may eventually be rewarded for their suffering by bearing an illustrious son. Though Io's story establishes the Danaids' right to appeal to Pelasgus, it also undercuts their appeal. In this paper, I argue that Aeschylus develops this tragic irony by alluding heavily to the themes of birth incantations, including the Io story, which were meant to vindicate and relieve the suffering of women in labor. Although Aeschylus regards these birth incantation themes as having a Near Eastern flavor, part of the barbarian character of the Danaids, the Greeks must have used birth incantations with similar themes for the allusions to be meaningful to them. The two sets of birth themes discussed in detail in this paper are those associated with the cow-maiden: the herdsman, copulation between bull and cow, eating plants in a meadow, the suffering of the female in labor, and divine intervention through healing touch; and those associated with the boat at sea: primordial waters, storm, journey, blockage, unfurling and untying, and the baby as cargo. I also look at a key difference between the Near Eastern and Greek cow-maiden stories, the negative portrayal of sexual