

422 BC
From The Suppliants

Euripides

The Theban Dialogue: Democracy or Despotism?

Translated by E. P. Coleridge paraphrased by Michael R. H. Swanson, Ph. D.

THESEUS prepares to send a messenger to Creon, King of Thebes, requesting permission to retrieve the dead for burial, when he sees a messenger in the regalia of HERALD approaching.

THESEUS (*to his herald*)

Who's that coming? It looks like a Theban herald. Hold on, he may save you the trouble of carrying my message to Thebes.

THEBAN HERALD

Who is the despot of this land? I have a message for him from Creon, who rules o'er the land of Cadmus, since the death of Eteocles.

THESEUS

Your Excellency misunderstands our government. Don't seek a despot here: we have no despot or tyrant. This city is not ruled by one man, but is free. Our people rule themselves, taking office in succession year after year. The wealthy get no preference or special privileges: the poor share in government equally.

THEBAN HERALD

I think you're toying with me, but I and the city I represent have the advantage. My city, Thebes, is ruled by one man only, not by the mob. Nobody there has to flatter and fool the citizens with fancy speeches in order to do what he thinks best. Nobody has to put a spin on things. Nobody manipulates people, twisting them this way and that for his own advantage. Our leader doesn't have to worry about having his failures exposed by whistle blowers, and face punishment by the same crowd who praised him moments before.

Thebes wouldn't want democracy anyhow. How shall people govern the state if they cannot form true judgments? No, it is time for reflecting and intellectual training, not haste, that leads to a better understanding of civic affairs. An ordinary working man, even if he had some education, would not have time or energy after working all day to give his mind to politics. The better sort of citizen knows that when a worthless man rises to high office by campaign promises to the ordinary people it is no healthy sign of community well being.

THESEUS (*Aside, to his entourage*)

This Herald is a clever fellow, but in the art of debate he's an amateur.

(*To the Herald*) Listen awhile, since you've challenged me to a political discussion. Nothing is more hostile to a city than a despot; where he is, there are no laws applicable to all. One man is tyrant, in his keeping alone the law resides, and in that case equality is at an end.

But when the laws are written down, rich and poor alike have equal justice. If the rich reviles the poor, the poor can respond using the same words, and if the weaker has the better argument on his side he will win over the stronger because he has justice on his side.

Freedom can be recognized this way: anyone who believes he has good advice can choose to give it, and gain public fame. Anyone who prefers to remain silent can do so. What greater equality can there be in a city?

Another sign is this, where people are absolute rulers of the land, they rejoice in the younger generations. A tyrant is suspicious of young people because he recognizes that their leaders may challenge his power. Rather than cultivate them he discreetly has them killed.

How then can a city remain stable, where one cuts short all enterprise and mows down the young like meadow-flowers in spring-time? What incentive is there for parents to acquire wealth and livelihood for their children, merely to add to the tyrant's wealth by their efforts? Why train up virgin daughters virtuously in our homes when a tyrant can rape them whenever he wants, just to gratify a whim? Why raise children if one is powerless to protect them? I'd rather die than see my children treated this way!

This arrow of argument I launch in answer to yours. Now say, why have you come? What do you need from this land? Had not your city sent you, you would have been punished for your outrageous speech. But it is the herald's duty to tell the message he is bidden and hie him back in haste.

SOURCE: <http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/suppliants.html>