

# The Power of Language in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

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**Abstract** This article examines the remarkable way in which the *Oresteia* not only stages language from various perspectives, but also reflects on language, with characters in the dramas explicitly considering language or the audience implicitly learning about language through monologues, dialogues and actions. The main focus of these reflections is on the relationship between object and language, the difference between appearance and reality, and the difference between knowledge and opinion. The question of the authority of the speaker is also addressed. This allows the *Oresteia* to be situated more firmly than ever in the intellectual context of its time.

**Keywords** Reflection on language. Seeming and being. Rhetoric. Authority of the speaker. *Peitho* and *bia*.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Aspects of Language in the *Oresteia*. – 3 Reflections on Language in the *Oresteia*. – 4 *Peitho* and *Bia*: A Preview.

## 1 Introduction

The significance of language, in various respects, is one of the elements that contributes to the complexity of the *Oresteia*. Anyone who has conducted an in-depth study of the *Oresteia* will be convinced that the complexity of this trilogy is almost unparalleled, such that its contents cannot be reduced to a simple statement of fact. The basic structure of the trilogy, which was performed in 458 BC, can be briefly summarised as follows. In the first play, *Agamemnon*, Clytaemestra murders her husband, Agamemnon, upon the latter's return to Argos from Troy, alleging as the main reason that he sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia when he set out for Troy. In the

second play, *Libation Bearers*, their son, Orestes, avenges his father's murder by killing his mother. Finally, in the third play, the *Eumenides*, Athena brings Orestes before the court of the Areopagus, where he is acquitted – but only narrowly because Athena's vote in favour of Orestes is needed to break the tie. Nonetheless, this majority decision does not conclusively resolve the problem of guilt and retribution, as is shown in the last third of the *Eumenides*, in which Athena struggles to appease the Furies, who are enraged by the verdict.

The basic structure of the trilogy, which is associated with numerous conflicts and problems,<sup>1</sup> integrates both the past and the future. One common thread running through the work can be found in the power of Dike,<sup>2</sup> which is sometimes viewed abstractly and at other times personified. She plays a role not only in staging the causality of guilt, but also in framing the question of how to evaluate the Trojan War, which is very present, above all in *Agamemnon*. Moreover, the important role played by Dike may also explain why, in this trilogy, Aeschylus so conspicuously brings various aspects of the power of language to the stage.<sup>3</sup> This is done by means of certain literary strategies that present language as an integral part of the dramas. However, his staging of the power of language also includes reflections on language, which are thematised throughout the trilogy. The various characters consider the relationship between the spoken word and truth, as well as the question of how language can be used to create a sense of plausibility and how it is possible to distinguish between seeming and being. These considerations are adapted to the respective plots: they are shaped by Clytaemestra's murderous scheming and dishonesty in *Agamemnon*, by Orestes' intrigues in the *Libation Bearers*, and by the fact that the question of guilt is dealt with in the *Eumenides* in the form of a trial, where rhetoric is already the focus *per se*.

In light of this emphasis on the power and possibilities of language, Aeschylus must, in my opinion, be placed even more firmly than has so far been the case in the intellectual context of his time, because he was influenced by the differentiation of democracy in the political sphere, which included rhetoric as a means of self-assertion. As Goldhill pointed out already in 1997, it was not only Euripides who was influenced by contemporary rhetoric, but also Aeschylus.<sup>4</sup>

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1 See Föllinger 2003 *passim*; 2009 *passim*.

2 See Medda 2024, 1: 15-18.

3 On the connection between *dike* and *peitho* in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, see Goldhill 1997, 139. On the influence of the democratic institutions of the People's Assembly and the courts on the language of tragedy in general, see Goldhill 1997, 132-3; Scapin 2020, 206-7.

4 See Goldhill 1997, 135.

However, Aeschylus did not merely restrict himself to the practice of rhetoric. The *Oresteia* also exhibits – and this is particularly interesting – a more general *and* overarching interest in the theoretical dimension of rhetoric, in that it takes up and contributes to contemporary discussions about the power of *peitho*. It also, and even more profoundly, engages with discussions about language, its possibilities and its function as a mediator of truth, meaning its relationship to reality. In this context, names such as Parmenides, Melissos, Protagoras and Gorgias are especially significant.

The possibility of a relationship between the pre-Socratics and Aeschylus has already been discussed, for example by Rösler (1970) and Kouremenos (1993), as well as Seaford (2012) and Scapin (2020), although the latter two scholars are primarily concerned with conceptions of the cosmos.<sup>5</sup> The existence of a connection with the thought of the sophist Gorgias has also been pointed out, especially by Sansone (2012). However, scholars who study the relationship between Aeschylus and the pre-Socratics must confront two main difficulties: first, whether it is really possible to prove beyond reasonable doubt the existence of dependencies between individual passages and, second, what the direction of influence was. In the case of Parmenides, this is difficult to determine due to uncertainties regarding dating. In the case of Gorgias, the question is whether, as a young man, he had already been in contact with – and was influenced by – Aeschylus or, conversely, whether he had already developed ideas at a young age that may have subsequently influenced Aeschylus, even though the works of his that we are familiar with were written later than those of Aeschylus.<sup>6</sup> At any rate, similarities can be observed between elements found in Aeschylus' works and Gorgias' thought, as we find it in the *Encomium to Helen*, which makes it conceivable that Aeschylus influenced Gorgias. Sansone (2012) seeks to elaborate on this point in his book, which highlights the significance of drama for the development of rhetoric. However that may be, instead of trying to prove the existence of individual dependencies, I will focus here on the claim that the *Oresteia*, as a trilogy about the power of language, forms part of a discourse that shaped the fifth century.

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**5** See the connection already noted by Rösler (1970). Seaford (2012) has recently explored this issue from a different perspective, but I believe there is still room for further enquiry. Rosenmeyer (1955) has already pointed out the conceptual connection between Gorgias and Aeschylus, arguing that Gorgias was inspired by tragedy, and especially by Aeschylus, in his conception of *apate*. He even considered the possibility that the two met in Sicily (Rosenmeyer 1955, 233).

**6** Gorgias was a significantly younger contemporary of Aeschylus – he was probably around thirty years old when the *Oresteia* was performed, and his famous visit to Athens occurred thirty years after that, in 427 BC.

## 2 Aspects of Language in the *Oresteia*

In order to structure the vast field that is the power of language, I have attempted to systematise my impressions, identifying seven areas that manifest the power of language in different ways. It is helpful to distinguish them for heuristic reasons, even though they are, of course, interlinked in the text and staging.

In the following, I will touch on six of the areas only in passing, before examining the seventh area, which is of particular interest to me, in more detail on the basis of selected passages. I call this seventh area 'reflections on language', insofar as language is not only presented to the audience, but also reflected upon, whether implicitly or explicitly. First, however, let us go through the other six areas:

1) The first area is the aesthetics of linguistic design itself.<sup>7</sup> It is well known that Aeschylus' language is characterised by the creative use of words, along with concise expression and syntax. It is also known that it contains morphologically complex word combinations, numerous hapax legomena and so on.<sup>8</sup> It can be said that Aeschylus experiments with language here. Indeed, he was already well known for this at the time, and this peculiarity is famously mocked at length in Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs*.<sup>9</sup> However, these word formations are not to be regarded simply as *l'art pour l'art* but clearly reflect an attempt to express complex thoughts and feelings that cannot be adequately captured by conventional language. By way of example, I will mention only the chorus' description of the god of war, Ares, in the first stasimon as χρυσαιοβόδς σωμαίων (*Ag.* 437) and Cassandra's description of the House of Atreus as ἀνδρσφαγεῖον (*Ag.* 1092, assuming that Dobree's conjecture is correct).

2) The second area is the linguistic interpretation of names.<sup>10</sup> In the second stasimon, the chorus reflects on the name Helena, with the old men remarking that this name is "completely true/correct" (ἐς τὸ πᾶν ἐτητύμως, *Ag.* 682). They justify this claim by invoking the etymology *helein* = to destroy (*Ag.* 681-99). In my opinion, the background to these reflections is the philosophical question of the

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7 On the technical aspects in general, see Goldhill 1997, 150.

8 In general, see Earp 1948; Lebeck 1971; Goldhill 1984.

9 Aristoph. *Ran.* 906-26.

10 See Schweizer-Keller 1972.

nature of the relationship between a thing and its name, as discussed by the pre-Socratics, including Gorgias.<sup>11</sup>

3) The third area concerns the diverse rhetorical structures of the speeches and dialogues in the three plays. The characters' use of rhetoric also serves to characterise them. An impressive example of this is Clytaemestra, whom Aeschylus endows with particular rhetorical skill. Various studies have examined her rhetoric, including from a gender perspective,<sup>12</sup> and Enrico Medda has demonstrated how Aeschylus portrays her as manipulative by studying her confrontations with both Agamemnon and the chorus.<sup>13</sup> Another example is provided by the god Apollo in the *Eumenides*, who serves as an advocate in Orestes' trial involving the Furies, resorting to suitable rhetorical strategies to help his protégé.<sup>14</sup> For instance, in a situation where he has no real counterargument to the Furies' claims, he resorts to personal attacks, arguing *ad personam* by calling them beasts (*Eum.* 640-4):

XO. πατρὸς προτιμᾶ Ζεὺς μόνον τῷ σῶ λόγῳ·  
αὐτὸς δ' ἔδησε πατέρα πρεσβύτεην Κρόνον·  
πῶς ταῦτα τούτοις οὐκ ἐναντίως λέγεις;  
ὑμᾶς δ' ἀκούειν ταῦτ' ἐγὼ μαρτύρομαι.  
ΑΠ. ὧ παντομισῆ κνώδαλα, στύγη θεῶν [...]

CO. On your account, Zeus sets a higher value on the death of a father. Yet he himself imprisoned his old father, Cronus. Isn't your statement in contradiction with that? I call you to witness that you have heard these words.

AP. You utter loathsome beasts, hated by the gods!<sup>15</sup>

This form of argumentation was common in ancient rhetoric. Shortly afterwards, Apollo attempts to prove Orestes' innocence by means of sophisticated manoeuvre, arguing that a child is not related to its mother (ll. 657-61) and that Orestes is therefore innocent. Finally, he bribes Athena by promising to help Athens achieve greater prominence (ll. 667-73). Moreover, Athena herself is shown to be a

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**11** See Kraus 1987, 134-5, 140-2. However, he errs in arguing that Aeschylus remained stuck in ancient traditions, because he did not believe that the thing and its designation were separate (Kraus 1987, 135). For a critique of this claim, see also Kouremenos 1993, 264f. In fact, the use of ἐπιτύμως makes clear that he is aware of the philosophical discussion, otherwise such an evaluation, which rests on the premise that a designation can also be incorrect, would make no sense.

**12** In general, see McClure 1999; Foley 2001.

**13** Medda 2020a.

**14** Föllinger 2009, 158-60. See also Zimmermann 2019, 607-8, who agrees.

**15** Transl. by Sommerstein 2008.

skilled rhetorician in her dialogue with the Furies after the trial, where she succeeds in changing the minds of the enraged goddesses.

4) The fourth area, which is related to the third, concerns the relationship between the rhetoric that Aeschylus has a character use and the success of that rhetoric. Sometimes, the power of words is not enough. Thus, while Clytaemestra usually prevails, Apollo, despite winning over Athena with his arguments, fails to convince the human judges of the Areopagus, who vote against Orestes. In this context, we can draw on research that makes use of modern speech-act theory to interpret tragedies, such as the studies of Vollbracht and Zetzmann,<sup>16</sup> by examining the success or failure of rhetorical strategies in more detail and enquiring into the underlying causes. For instance, one reason for the success or failure of a speech act may lie in the character's authority. Thus, despite her controlled, addressee-oriented and flexible use of language, Clytaemestra must repeatedly fight to secure her authority, as is made clear by her confrontations with the chorus, which dominate the drama. We will come back to this point later on.

5) With the failure of rhetorical strategies, we come to the fifth area, namely silence, the negation of speech. We know that Aeschylus used scenes of silence in both his *Achilleis* and his tragedy *Niobe*. This must have been very impressive, and Aristophanes makes fun of it at length in his comedy *Frogs* (ll. 906-26). In *Agamemnon*, Clytaemestra fails because of Cassandra, who answers all her appeals with silence, until Clytaemestra finally enters the palace. In this way, Aeschylus demonstrates the limits of the power of language.<sup>17</sup>

6) Another area in which the power of language is manifested is the religious sphere, and specifically the magical effect that language is assigned there. This is encapsulated in the 'binding song' of the Erinyes in *Eumenides*,<sup>18</sup> which the goddesses sing in an attempt to bind Orestes.

7) Finally, there is another important area that I would like to introduce here, which, as mentioned earlier, I call 'reflections on language'. In other words, Aeschylus goes beyond the mere representation of language, insofar as the *Oresteia* reflects on the nature of language itself. This happens in two ways. On the one hand, the characters engage in reflection within the 'internal communication system' (*inneres Kommunikationssystem*) of the drama, to use Pfister's terminology,<sup>19</sup> by making a kind of meta-commentary or meta-remark. This is an explicit form of reflection. On

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**16** Vollbracht 2023; Zetzmann 2021.

**17** See also Medda 2020b.

**18** See also Burkert 1962 for the use of γοητής in *Libation Bearers*.

**19** Pfister 2011, 20-2.

the other hand, a given character's monologue or a dialogue between two characters makes it clear to the recipients in the 'external communication system' (*äußeres Kommunikationssystem*) – i.e. the audience or readers and listeners – that the play is dealing with fundamental aspects of language, speech and rhetoric. This is therefore an implicit form of reflection.

### 3 Reflections on Language in the *Oresteia*

Let us turn now to the first form, namely meta-remarks. In this context, there is an important passage in the second epeisodion that has always seemed striking to me. A herald reaches Argos before Agamemnon himself arrives. After he has given a report about the victory over Troy, the chorus wants to know where Menelaus has gone. The herald does not answer immediately, but first spends four lines discussing the difference between a beautiful lie and the truth (οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅπως λέξαιμι τὰ ψευδῆ καλὰ) with the chorus. Having given this information, he then confirms that what is known about Agamemnon is not false (οὐ ψευδῆ λέγω, ll. 620-5):

Κῆρυξ· οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅπως λέξαιμι τὰ ψευδῆ καλὰ  
ἐς τὸν πολὺν φίλοισι καρποῦσθαι χρόνον.  
Χορός· πῶς δῆτ' ἂν εἰπὼν κεδνὰ τάλιθ' ἴχουσι;  
σχισθέντα δ' οὐκ εὐκρυπτα γίγνεται τάδε.  
Κῆρυξ· ἀνὴρ ἄφαντος ἐξ Ἀχαικοῦ στρατοῦ,  
αὐτός τε καὶ τὸ πλοῖον. οὐ ψευδῆ λέγω.

AR. Non mi è possibile raccontare notizie false facendole apparire belle, in modo che gli amici possano goderne il frutto a lungo.  
CO. Come potresti allora, dandoci buone notizie, cogliere anche la verità?  
Quando le due cose sono separate, non lo si può certo nascondere.  
AR. Quell'uomo è scomparso dall'esercito acheo, lui e la sua nave: non dico bugie.<sup>20</sup>

The herald's hesitation can be seen in terms of a desire not to break a religious taboo by speaking ill on a day of joy, namely that of the victory over Troy. Nevertheless, the way in which – and level of detail

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<sup>20</sup> Transl. by Medda 2024. Here and in the following, I use Medda's translation of the *Agamemnon*, as I also follow his version of text in these passages. This mixture of different languages (English and Italian) may seem strange, but I believe it reflects very well the international nature of research on Aeschylus.

with which – the difference between truth and lie is addressed here is striking, given that this meta-reflection is not essential to the plot of the drama and comes from the mouth of a character who does not otherwise appear to be a deep thinker. For my part, I see this as a reflection of the contemporary discussion about the difference between seeming and being (*Schein und Sein*). This interpretation becomes all the more plausible if one considers the fact that this meta-reflection by the herald takes place in a context that deals with the difficulty of recognising lies or false speech. Immediately before this, Clytaemestra had instructed the herald to tell Agamemnon of her loyalty to and longing for him, and she concludes this lie with an assertion that it is the truth. By doing this, Clytaemestra provokes the chorus into making a comment that is difficult to interpret, but that probably suggests that the herald should be careful about what she says<sup>21</sup> (*Ag.* 613-16):

Κλ. τοιόσδ' ὁ κόμπος, τῆς ἀληθείας γέμων,  
οὐκ αἰσχρὸς ὡς γυναικὶ γενναίᾳ λακεῖν.  
ΧΟ. αὕτη μὲν οὕτως εἶπε, μανθάνοντί σοι  
τοροῖσιν ἔρμηνεῦσιν εὐπρεπῆ λόγον

CL. Questo è il vanto, carico di verità, che per una donna nobile non è vergogna levare a gran voce.

CH. Costei così ha parlato, a te che comprendi: un discorso ben fatto a giudizio di interpreti chiari.

At the same time, the herald's reflection points to a difference that is addressed even more pointedly a little later on: when Agamemnon returns (in the third episode), the chorus welcomes him, but also warns him against people who prefer to appear to be something they are not (*Ag.* 788-9):

πολλοὶ δὲ βροτῶν τὸ δοκεῖν εἶναι  
προτίουσι δίκην παραβάντες·

Molti fra i mortali, violata la giustizia,  
tengono in onore sopra tutto l'apparenza;

Kouremenos (1993) discussed this passage, dealing extensively with Rösler (1970), particularly the question of whether εἶναι should be understood here as a full verb or a copula. Be that as it may, there is certainly an implied opposition between being and appearance, thus evoking Parmenides' philosophical ideas, even if the context

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**21** See Medda 2024 *ad l.*

here is ethical rather than ontological.<sup>22</sup> In terms of its content, this warning from the chorus probably refers to the citizens of Argos, since, as the audience learned in the first stasimon, they are angry with Agamemnon on account of their having been forced to make so many sacrifices for a woman. That said, the chorus could also be referring to Clytaemestra with its warning, since it suspects that she is being dishonest towards Agamemnon. On the whole, however, it seems more plausible to me that the gnomic nature of the formulation indicates that Aeschylus wanted to provoke a general discussion here.

Subsequently, the problem of truth is addressed from an epistemological perspective in another passage in the fifth episode, where the presence of such a philosophical reflection is at least as strange. The death cries of Agamemnon, as Clytaemestra murders him, can be heard from the palace, and the chorus initially deliberates at length about what is actually happening. The old men cannot agree on whether they should intervene immediately or whether they should first find out more about what is going on. The discussion unfolds through twelve distinct contributions. In this context, they express the view that conjecture and knowledge are two different things (ll. 1366-9):

- ἦ γὰρ τεκμηρίοισιν ἔξ οἰμωγμάτων  
μαντευσόμεσθα τάνδρὸς ὡς ὀλωλότος;  
- σάφ' εἰδότας χρὴ τῶνδε μυθεῖσθαι πέρι·  
τὸ γὰρ τοπάζειν τοῦ σάφ' εἰδέναι δίχα.

- Dovremo dunque dare il responso che quell'uomo è morto, basandoci sulla prova che si può trarre dai lamenti?  
- Dobbiamo parlare di queste cose solo dopo aver saputo esattamente, perché far congetture è ben diverso dal sapere chiaramente.

Almost like at a trial, they call into question whether Agamemnon's cries provide sufficient evidence (*martyria*) to draw a conclusion. And with a statement that would be more appropriate in the context of a philosophical discussion than a potential murder in progress, they pedantically distinguish, so to speak, between precise knowledge

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**22** In his insightful article, Kouremenos critically engages with Rösler (1970) and, on the basis of this and other passages, plausibly argues that there are connections between Parmenides' philosophy and Aeschylus, even if Aeschylus turns Parmenides' ontological conception into an ethical one (Kouremenos 1993). However, it is not clear to me that εἶναι should not be understood here as a copula (as Fraenkel 1962 *ad l.* and Medda 2024 *ad l.* also interpret it). Kouremenos (1993) takes εἶναι to be a full verb and thus sees in it the 'genuine' Parmenidean idea of existence and appearance. However, his interpretation of what this means in the context of the drama remains unclear.

(σάφ' εἰδότης) and pure conjecture (τοπάζειν). This inclusion of epistemological considerations that are narratively unnecessary (it would have been sufficient to depict the chorus' hesitation) in an extremely dramatic moment that calls for action seems downright bizarre. What purpose could this have other than to force the audience to think about the meaning of such discussions?

*Martyria* and the problem of proof are also the subject of the aforementioned lengthy dispute (from line 263 to line 614) between Clytaemestra and the chorus. Both forms that I distinguish can be found here: the meta-remarks of individuals (i.e. the explicit form) and the fact that the recipients of the external communication system learn something about the power of language through the dramatic dialogues (i.e. the implicit form). The dispute between Clytaemestra and the chorus ultimately revolves around the question of who has the authority to speak. Through the figure of Clytaemestra, Aeschylus depicts a woman who claims authority for herself and has factual arguments on her side, but who can also assert herself by appealing to emotions if necessary. This makes her superior to the chorus, as well as to Agamemnon, but it does not protect her from being repeatedly reduced to her social status as the ruler's wife or her role as a woman. However, she manages to incorporate this into her strategies, thus gaining the upper hand. Through the figure of Clytaemestra, Aeschylus plays with tradition, or rather breaks with it, since the authority of the speaker customarily depends, in the first instance, on his social status (an example of this is the dispute between Odysseus and Thersites in the *Iliad*).<sup>23</sup> Aeschylus' detailed dramatisation of the connection between language and authority can perhaps be better understood when contextualised historically. After all, Athenian democracy considered it a great achievement that permission to speak, *parrhesia*, no longer depended on social class. And the success of the Sophists was probably based in part on their promise to enable everyone to succeed rhetorically, and thus also politically.<sup>24</sup> In reality, the *thētai* were granted the right to political participation, but women, as is well known, were not. In this respect, the tragedy exaggerates the problem in a fictional way, so to speak.

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**23** See Heßler 2019, 24-6.

**24** The Aristophanic comedies also bear witness to this. The whole of *Clouds* serves to satirise the power of rhetoric, while, in *Frogs*, Dionysus, as arbitrator, criticises the fact that all citizens are now trained in rhetoric, claiming that this corrupts morals. Aristophanes' Dionysus blames Euripides for this, while Aeschylus is portrayed as the one who preserved the old customs. That said, this has to do with the structure of the comedy, which constructs an opposition between the two everywhere, as well as with the fact that Euripides, of course, uses rhetoric differently from Aeschylus. However, this does not mean that Aeschylus does not have his own rhetoric.

Let us now take a closer look at the texts. At the beginning of the parodos, the chorus has just stated that its age gives it the authority to speak (θροεῖν) (ll. 104-6):

κύριός εἰμι θροεῖν ὄδιον κράτος αἴσιον ἀνδρῶν  
ἐκτελέων· ἔτι γὰρ θεόθεν καταπνεύει  
πειθῶ, μολπᾶν ἀλκάν, σύμφυτος αἰών·

È in mio potere narrare la forza di uomini nel fiore degli anni  
postasi  
in strada sotto buoni auspici – ancora infatti l'età  
che mi è connaturata fa spirare da parte degli dèi la  
persuasione, valore fatto di canti –

When Clytaemestra comes on stage, the old men make it clear to her that they respect her because she is Agamemnon's wife and Agamemnon is not here. They thus immediately underline her actually subordinate role. That is why, when she announces to them that Troy has fallen, they are sceptical and force her to give them proof. This scepticism on the part of the chorus leads to a conflict stichomythia. The issue is the plausibility of Clytaemestra's statement, as made clear by the concision of the word field πιστός<sup>25</sup> and the leitmotif τέκμαρ (l. 272), proof (ll. 268-80):

XO. πῶς φῆς; πέφευγε τοῦπος ἐξ ἀπιστίας.  
ΚΛ. Τροίαν Ἀχαιῶν οὔσαν· ἦ τορῶς λέγω;  
XO. χαρά μ' ὑφέρπει δάκρυον ἐκκαλουμένη.  
ΚΛ. εὐ γὰρ φρονούντος ὄμμα σου κατηγορεῖ.  
XO. τί γὰρ τὸ πιστόν ἐστι τῶνδ' ἐσοί τέκμαρ;  
ΚΛ. ἔστιν· τί δ' οὐχί; μὴ δολώσαντος θεοῦ.  
XO. πότερα δ' ὄνειρων φάσματ' εὐπειθῆ σέβεις;  
ΚΛ. οὐ δόξαν ἂν λάβοιμι βριζούσης φρενός.  
XO. ἀλλ' ἦ σ' ἐπίανέν τις ἄπτερος φάτις;  
ΚΛ. παιδὸς νέας ὡς κάρτ' ἐμωμήσω φρένας.  
XO. ποίου χρόνου δὲ καὶ πεπόρθηται πόλις;  
ΚΛ. τῆς νῦν τεκούσης φῶς τόδ' εὐφρόνης λέγω.  
XO. καὶ τίς τόδ' ἐξίκοιτ' ἂν ἀγγέλων τάχος;

CO. Cosa dici? Le tue parole mi sfuggono, tanta è l'incredulità!  
CL. Dico che Troia è in mani Achee; parlo abbastanza chiaro?  
CO. S'insinua in me una gioia che suscita il pianto.

**25** 268: ἀπιστία; 272: πιστόν; 274: εὐπιθῆ, and, associated with prudence, 271: εὐφρονούντος, already announced in 265 by εὐφρόνης, with the same meaning in v. 279 and 337.

CL. Il tuo sguardo rivela la gioia che provi.  
CO. Ma qual è la prova sicura di quel che dici?  
CL. La prova c'è, come no?, a meno che un dio non mi abbia ingannato.  
CO. Presti forse fede a persuasive visioni di sogni?  
CL. Di certo non accoglierei l'illusione di una mente che dorme.  
CO. Allora ti ha esaltato una voce senz'ali?  
CL. Tu biasimi la mia mente, come fosse quella di una bimba.  
CO. Ma quand'è che la città è stata saccheggiata?  
CL. In questa stessa notte che ha generato il giorno di oggi, ti dico.  
CO. E qual è mai il messaggero che potrebbe giungere così rapidamente?

The scene takes on the character of a court of law, because the chorus accuses Clytaemestra of having fallen for some fantasy or rumour. Clytaemestra sharply rejects the accusation and refuses to be treated like a child. In doing so, she makes clear that she considers the chorus' insinuation to be the product of what we would call gender bias. This is, in fact, the case. Because of the power imbalance between them, the chorus does not say this to her face, but it becomes explicit in two later passages, when the old men state that women are easily taken in by rumours and that their word carries no weight.<sup>26</sup>

When, in response to their query, the old men discover that Troy was conquered the night before, they express disbelief that there could be a messenger (ἄγγελος, l. 280) capable of bringing the news from Troy to Argos so quickly. Here we see the problem: the chorus thinks in traditional categories and can only conceive of the news being born by a messenger. But Clytaemestra has no traditional messenger to offer them; she is modern. As a result, instead of conjuring up a physical messenger, she uses speech, λόγους, to prove the accuracy of her information, namely by referring to a chain of signals (ll. 281-316) from Mount Ida to Argos which she had arranged so as to be informed about the fall of Troy in a timely manner. This description is replete with geographical details that reflects the interests and knowledge of Aeschylus' time.<sup>27</sup> The leitmotif of the 'messenger', who is, in this case, the fire or the fire signals, runs throughout the entire passage. In this way, Clytaemestra cleverly takes up the chorus' mention of a

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**26** Epode of the first stasimon, ll. 475-88: The chorus is once again incredulous, questioning the evidential value of the fire and criticising the credulity of women. See *Ch.* 845f.: the words (λόγοι) of women quickly vanish into thin air.

**27** See Medda 2020a, 54.

messenger.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, she is speaking of her λόγους as proof at the end of her speech (ll. 315-16):

τέκμαρ τοιοῦτον σύμβολόν τέ σοι λέγω  
ἄνδρὸς παραγγείλαντος ἐκ Τροίας ἐμοί.

Tale prova e tale pegno ti riferisco da parte del mio sposo,  
che mi ha mandato notizie da Troia.

With these words, she refers back to the chorus' initial demand for a πιστὸν τέκμαρ (l. 272).

Now the chorus is overwhelmed and wants her to repeat her 'proof' (ll. 317-19). However, Clytaemestra does not respond to this request, but instead changes her strategy – shifting away from scientific proof and towards imagination. After uttering a simple statement (l. 320) that Troy has fallen, she imagines what the situation must be like, introducing the imagined scenario with the word οἶμαι ('I imagine'), which stands in contrast to her scientific proof.<sup>29</sup> In this imagined scenario, she paints a picture of how the conquered and the conquerors are behaving at Troy. She concludes her depiction with the fear that the victorious Greeks might behave with *hybris*, thereby incurring the wrath of the gods and ending up in a situation comparable to that of the defeated Trojans. The closing sentence of her account (l. 348), which underlines that she is female, obviously takes up the chorus's contempt for the speech of women in an ironic way:

τοιαῦτά τοι γυναικὸς ἐξ ἐμοῦ κλύεις·

Questo è quanto odi da me, una donna;

This time, however, the chorus believes her, praising her for speaking reasonably and like a sensible man, and calling her imaginary depiction πιστὰ τεκμήρια (ll. 351-4):

γύναι, κατ' ἄνδρα σῶφρον' εὐφρόνως λέγεις.  
ἐγὼ δ' ἀκούσας πιστὰ σου τεκμήρια  
θεοὺς προσειπεῖν εὔ παρασκευάζομαι.  
χάρις γὰρ οὐκ ἄτιμος εἴργασται πόνων.

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**28** l. 264: εὐάγγελος. This term is taken up by the chorus in the first stasimon (l. 475: εὐαγγέλου; l. 480: παραγγέλμασιν).

**29** See Medda 2020a, 55.

Donna, come un uomo tu parli con senno e buona intenzione;  
e io, avendo udito da te prove affidabili,  
mi appresto a invocare gli dèi come si conviene,  
poiché è stato ottenuto un compenso non  
inadeguato per le sofferenze.

The chorus does not explicitly state why it now believes her, but one could interpret this shift in psychological terms, as the result of her appealing to the old men's emotions. By means of her imagination, she connects with the experiences of the men, who are all veterans, and her vague fear expressed at the end falls on fertile ground, because the chorus itself is constantly plagued by such diffuse fears. In short, the chorus considers the evidential value of the chain of signals to be unpersuasive, but sees her imagined scenario as reasonable. Clytaemestra has thus proven herself to be a skilled rhetorician who is eloquent and able to adapt flexibly to her audience.<sup>30</sup> When she realises that the factual evidence lies beyond the comprehension of the old men, who are not attuned to the innovations it reflects, she appeals to their emotions.

By means of this scenario, Aeschylus introduces and demonstrates the problematic relationship between power and language that pervades the entire *Oresteia*. This is underlined by the fact that the chorus' acceptance of Clytaemestra's claim at this point does not mean that the dispute is over. Rather, the question of discursive authority is prolonged in what one can be perceived as a conspicuous and downright intrusive manner, because it is certainly no coincidence that, in the first stasimon (below), the chorus sings of the negative power of *Peitho*, which it demonstrates by invoking Helen's seduction by Paris (ll. 385-6):

βιάται δ' ἄ τάλαινα Πειθῶ,  
προβούλου παῖς ἄφερτος Ἄτας

fa forza la sciagurata Persuasione,  
irresistibile figlia di Rovina che premedita.

By combining the power of *Peitho* with Helen's seduction by Paris, Aeschylus anticipated the Sophist Gorgias, or perhaps even inspired him. For in his *Encomium of Helen*, a kind of playful speech intended to demonstrate the power of rhetoric, Gorgias identifies four possible forms of violence that Helen could not escape and explains why she cannot be considered guilty: one of these is the violence of Paris' seductive rhetoric, which Helen had no means of resisting (§§ 8-15).

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**30** See Medda 2020a.

But while Gorgias sees this possibility positively, as representing proof of the power of rhetoric, in our case it is negative. For unlike Gorgias' rhetorical exercise, the seductive force of *peitho* is portrayed negatively in *Agamemnon*: by inducing Helen's departure, Paris' *peitho* brings about the absolute ruin not only of Troy, but also the ruin of the Greeks themselves.

After the power of speech has been illuminated by this commentary on the part of the chorus, it is reflected again in the drama itself. For the chorus' acceptance of Clytaemestra's 'proof' is only momentary: at the end of the first stasimon, the old men once again begin to doubt the reliability of the chain of signals. By linking this doubt to the fundamental doubt about the reliability of female speech,<sup>31</sup> a transition is made to the appearance of the messenger in the second epeisodion - a messenger whom the chorus accepts, in contrast to the fire message - a physical herald who participated in the war as a soldier. The chorus believes his account of the conquest of Troy, expressing its approval through the formulation νικῶμενος λόγοισιν ('defeated by words') (l. 583). It is obviously the combination of male authority and eyewitness testimony that convinces the chorus. Clytaemestra triumphs because the herald's words prove her right, remarking that she was not believed simply because she was a woman (ll. 587-93). These sentences read like a metapoetic commentary on the theme of authority and language.<sup>32</sup> *Logoi* which present factual arguments, specifically the signal chain, cannot prevail if they are not connected to the authority of the speaker.

#### 4 *Peitho and Bia: A Preview*

The situation is different with regard to another female character in the *Oresteia*, who has the advantage of being a goddess, namely Athena.<sup>33</sup> Her task in the *Eumenides* is to appease the Furies, who are enraged by Orestes' acquittal. She succeeds in doing so, and attributes her success to her connection to *Peitho* (ll. 970-2):

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**31** The semantic field is once again 'plausibility' and 'mistrust' in the linguistic authority of women (l. 478: ψύθος; l. 481: ἀλλαγῆ λόγου; l. 484: πρὸ τοῦ φανεύτος = 'before it becomes visible'; l. 485: πιθανός).

**32** She goes one step further: just as she was able to dispense with the messenger, since she did not need him to be informed of Troy's fall, she can, as she succinctly puts it, also dispense with his report, since she will learn the *logos* from her husband (ll. 598-9). In doing so, she has restored the power imbalance: she is the ruler's wife (l. 599). Here, the motif that the chorus only shows her respect because she is, as we have seen, the wife of its master (ll. 257-9) is cleverly taken up.

**33** See also Buxton 1982, 110-13.

[...] στέργω δ' ὄμμα τὸ Πειθοῦς,  
ὅτι μοι γλῶσσαν καὶ στομ' ἐπώπα  
πρὸς τάσδ' ἀγρίως ἀπανηναμένας·

[...] and I am happy that the eyes of Persuasion  
watched over my tongue and lips  
when they responded to these beings who were savagely  
rebuffing me.<sup>34</sup>

Athena's success is thus the result of promising the Furies respect, worship and influence. Modern scholars have adopted a similar perspective, underlining Athena's rhetorical abilities. But this obscures the fact that Athena is not wholly dependent on her *peitho*. When she starts attempting to appease the old goddesses, she also refers to Zeus' thunder and lightning, to which she has access if *peitho* proves useless (*Eum.* 824-31). This means that she secures her position from the outset by appealing to her social status. This status also involves the monopoly on violence that she possesses as the warlike daughter of Zeus.

Through this characterisation of *peitho* as an instrument that can both destroy (Paris) and bring about peace (Erinyes) and that, in the political sphere, requires violence as a counterpart and last resort, a discussion is opened up that is continued on various levels, for example in Thucydides' Melian Dialogue and then pronouncedly in Plato's *Laws*, from which the last text, quoted below, is taken. In this passage, the Athenian interlocutor in the dialogue points out that, in the conception of the state that he and his interlocutors are developing, *peitho* is the ideal way to convince citizens that it makes sense to obey the laws, but he also emphasises that one must keep the possibility of *bia* in reserve, so to speak, for those who do not bow to *peitho* (*Lg.* IV 718 a6-b5):<sup>35</sup>

ἂ δὲ πρὸς ἐκγόνους καὶ συγγενεῖς καὶ φίλους καὶ πολίτας, ὅσα τε  
Ξενικὰ πρὸς θεῶν θεραπεύματα καὶ ὁμιλίας συμπάντων τούτων  
ἀποτελοῦντα τὸν αὐτοῦ βίον φαιδρυνάμενον κατὰ νόμον κοσμεῖν  
δεῖ, τῶν νόμων αὐτῶν ἢ διέξοδος, τὰ μὲν πείθουσα, τὰ δὲ μὴ  
ὑπέικοντα πειθοῖ τῶν ἡθῶν βία καὶ δίκη κολάζουσα, τὴν πόλιν ἡμῖν  
συμβουλευθέντων θεῶν μακαρίαν τε καὶ εὐδαίμονα ἀποτελεῖ.

As regards duties to children, relations, friends and citizens, and those of service done to strangers for Heaven's sake, and of social intercourse with all those classes, - by fulfilling which a man should

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**34** Transl. by Sommerstein 2008.

**35** Transl. by Bury 2014. See Föllinger 2016, 83-4.

brighten his own life and order it as the law enjoins, – the sequel of the laws themselves, partly by persuasion and partly (when men's habits defy persuasion) by forcible and just chastisement, will render our State, with the concurrence of the gods, a blessed State and a prosperous.

The prospect outlined by Plato shows the richness of the reflection on the power of language in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. This is true not only in terms of its place in contemporary discourse, but also because it conceptualises, or rather prefigures, fundamental problems of political philosophy on a dramatic level.

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