

The Voice of the *Dēmos* in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

There is abundant scholarship exploring speech and voice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, but these studies neglect one voice that is essential to understanding the socio-political nature of the trilogy: the voice of the *dēmos*. The word *dēmothroos* ("voiced by the people," Ag. 938, 883, 1409) is a concise example of the persistent connection in the *Oresteia* between the common citizenry and its voice. As far as we know, Aeschylus invented this word for the trilogy (Fraenkel 1950:937). Unlike other words for "the people" or "the citizenry" in the trilogy, words containing the *dēm-* stem almost always describe speech or are closely related to it.

The citizens of Argos, gathered into an informal political body, attempt unsuccessfully to use speech to redress the grievances committed against them. This body, which is characterized by speech—particularly curses—and by suffering, is repeatedly referred to as a *dēmos*. The citizens of Athens, by contrast, take part in an institutionalized judicial practice by which they are able to reach a decision collectively, using their votes as a form of speech. Thus Athens in the third play offers resolution to the dysfunction of Argos, hinging on the involvement of the citizenry in the political process and on Athena's kind patronage. But scholars have grappled—so far unsuccessfully—with an apparent paradox in the final play. If the *Eumenides* is supposed to celebrate the citizenry and their participation in government, why does it not offer them any speaking roles, especially when the *Agamemnon* provides so many lines to characters representing the people of Argos? The mystery of the silent *dēmos* of Athens cannot be solved by counting the actors playing citizens in each city or the number of times that words for "the people" occur, but by considering the extent to which each body of citizens is able to fulfill their ideal role, as Aeschylus presents it, within their current political system.

Although several scholars have commented on individual “lower-class” characters in the *Oresteia*, or have examined social status and hierarchy in the trilogy more generally, none has specifically addressed the role of the *dēmos* as vocal political unit. Griffith 1995, for example, provides valuable insight into the social organization and hierarchical relationships in the trilogy. Whereas Griffith is more interested in comparing the characterization and viewpoints of the elite characters with those who represent the “lower classes,” in which he includes Cassandra and the chorus of slave women in the *Choephoroi*, I exclude these non-citizens from my analysis and explore the *dēmos* as a socio-political unit constructed by Aeschylus to be similar in composition and purpose to the *dēmos* of his own day. For the historical context in which Aeschylus was writing, I rely on the work of Podlecki (1986), Jones (1987), Finley (1981), and de St. Croix (1981), among others. Although Ober does not mention Aeschylus’ work in *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (1998), his description of *demokratia* as a means for ordinary people to maintain dignity and to restrain the power of the elite underpins much of my analysis.

The primary purpose of the *dēmos* within the trilogy—to advocate for the wellbeing of the common people and to act as a check on the political power of the elite—is the same in both Argos and Athens, but the poleis differ in the extent to which the *dēmos* is allowed to fulfill this role. Through the Areopagus, the citizens of Athens, unlike the citizens of Argos, have a specific, sanctioned, and revered role within the political system. Because they possess a productive means of participating in the functioning of the polis, they do not need to act as a noisy mob, cursing and threatening to throw stones. This is yet another example of the myriad ways in which Aeschylus presents disorder and dysfunction in the beginning of the trilogy, and order and resolution at the end. Seemingly paradoxically, the citizens of Athens achieve this resolution and demonstrate the importance of free speech by remaining silent. Their vote is their voice.

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