

The Gendering of Off-Stage Cries in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

Central to the drama of the *Oresteia* trilogy are the murders of Agamemnon and Cassandra in *Agamemnon*, and Aegisthus and Clytemnestra in *Choephoroe*. While Cassandra and Clytemnestra are denied any speech after suffering fatal blows, Agamemnon and Aegisthus both cry out in distress in their final lines. Using a sociolinguistic approach, this paper closely examines the language of the death cries of Agamemnon and Aegisthus to argue that their cries operate as gendered signals that decisively reinforce the descriptions of each character established earlier in the trilogy.

After a discussion of the famous carpet scene and other crucial moments where Agamemnon's masculinity is challenged in *Agamemnon*, the first section of the paper argues that the king's twice-uttered death cry (ὄμοι, *Ag.* 1343, 1345) is an exclamation that is male exclusive—that is, it is uttered only by male characters in Aeschylus' complete plays (see McClure 1995, Lewis 2015). Although there are many other ways for a tragic character to exclaim, Agamemnon's final cry emphasizing his normative masculinity affirms his status as the head of his household in the moment of his murder and signals the destruction that this violence brings to his house.

The second part of the paper argues that Aegisthus' off-stage cry in *Choephoroe* (ἔἔ ὀτοτοτοῖ, *Choe.* 869) likewise sends a critical signal about his masculinity to audiences that responds to earlier challenges to his masculinity by the chorus in *Agamemnon* and Orestes in *Choephoroe*. Unlike Agamemnon, however, Aegisthus, in his final moments, utters an exclamation (ἔἔ) that is elsewhere uttered only by female speakers in Aeschylus' complete plays. While discussions of the gendered aspect of Aegisthus' cry (e.g. Schadewaldt 1932,

Garvie 1986, Brown 2018) have focused almost exclusively on the second element in Aegisthus' death cry (ὄτοτοτοῖ), this paper maintains that ὄτοτοτοῖ is not a marker of female speech, but is instead gender neutral in the complete plays of Aeschylus. Instead, the first element in the exclamation (ἔἔ) confirms Aegisthus' effeminate (and, thus, in the world of the *Oresteia*, weaker) character. The paper concludes by demonstrating that this off-stage cry as a whole (ἔἔ ὄτοτοτοῖ) sets Aegisthus in stark contrast to the trilogy's representations of Agamemnon and Orestes.

Select Bibliography

Biraud, M. (2010). *Les interjections du théâtre grec antique: Étude sémantique et pragmatique*.

Louvain-la-Neuve.

Brown, A., ed. (2018). *Aeschylus: Libation Bearers*. Liverpool.

Garvie, A.F., ed. (1986). *Aeschylus: Choepori*. Oxford.

Kucharski, J. (*forthcoming*). Voices of the Dying. Off-Stage Cries between Word and Action in the Greek Tragedians. *Mnemosyne*.

Lewis, V. (2015). Female Speech in Sophocles' *Electra*. *Phoenix* 69, pp. 217-241.

McClure, L. (1995). Female Speech and Characterization in Euripides. *Lo Spettacolo delle Voci* 2, pp. 35-60.

Nordgren, L. (2015). *The Greek Interjections*. Berlin.

Schadewaldt, W. (1932). Der Kommos in Aischylos' Choeporen. *Hermes* 67, pp. 312-354.

West, M.L. (1990). *Studies in Aeschylus*. Stuttgart.