

## Cassandra Barbarophonos: Aeschylus at the Language Barrier

Just after the halfway point of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytaemestra engages in a one-sided conversation with Cassandra, who has been standing mute in the chariot since Agamemnon's arrival (1053 ff.). When Cassandra doesn't answer, Clytaemestra assumes that Cassandra, as a Trojan, simply doesn't speak Greek. Although this assumption will ultimately prove false, the moment's hesitation reveals Aeschylus pushing at the bounds of realism and against the force of literary tradition, wrestling with and ultimately pinning down generic rules for the representation of non-Greeks within tragedy. In this paper I will situate a close reading of this scene in the context of pre-Aeschylean treatments of barbarians broadly, and barbarian women more specifically and argue that Aeschylus treatment exploits the tensions caused by the distance between the realistic expectations of 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenians and the conventions of their literature.

The poems of Homer, from whose "great banquet" Aeschylus' plays were imagined as slices, largely ignores the language barrier. Greeks and Trojans are able to converse easily enough; one thinks of Priam in Achilles' tent in *Iliad* 24, who talk easily enough without translators. Indeed the only moments in which the poet of the *Iliad* acknowledge the language barrier between different ethnic groups are a cluster of images in books 2-4, all of which serve to underscore the diverse and chaotic state of the army of the Trojans and their allies (see Ross 2005 and Gera 2003). Even if there are differences in what they say, as Hilary Mackie has argued, this is not an issue of a language barrier (Mackie 1996). Even the famous passages in which Homer alludes to the different names by which gods and men call birds or rivers may demonstrate the poet's authority or the pre-Greek substratum of the area, but this is easily enough overcome through the gods' powers (Gera 2003, Watkins 1995 and Güntert 1921).

Even among the most savage people, Odysseus never finds himself in need of a translator, and in fact imposing such realistic minutiae on the Homeric epic seems to diminish the epics. The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite seems to present the first real moment in which Greek literature grapples with the reality of cross-language communication, in the form of Aphrodite's elaborate lie about why she, though Phrygian, is able to speak Anchises' language. But this presents an exception and not a new standard. Greek literature following in Homer's footsteps largely ignores the problem of how to represent communication between different speech communities.

Which is what makes Clytaemestra's speculation that Cassandra, like the sparrow "has an unknown barbarian language" (ἀγνώτα φωνὴν βάρβαρον κεκτημένη, 1051) all the more striking. Aeschylus forces the audience to abandon the expectations prompted by all their literary conditions that even foreigners will speak Greek in a piece of Greek art and to actually question how he as a poet will contrive this for us. When Cassandra still remains mute Clytaemestra suggests the use of sign language (or perhaps violence), telling the chorus to communicate with a "barbarian-speaking hand instead of their voice" (ἀντὶ φωνῆς ...καρβάνωι χειρι, 1061) to which the chorus reply that the girl needs a "smart interpreter" (ἐρμηνέως τοροῦ, 1062). All signs point to the possibility that the character on the stage does not understand Greek: her long period standing silently on stage, her refusal to comply with Clytaemestra's commands or the chorus' encouragement, her status as a foreigner.

When Cassandra finally does begin to speak her words only gradually reveal themselves to be Greek. She cries out in inarticulate grief "ὄτοτοτοτοῖ πόποι δᾶ·/ ὄπολλον ὄπολλον" (1072-3). The first two "words" are both paralinguistic, moans associated with the expression of certain negative emotions, but hardly "Greek words" in their own right. Even Cassandra's transition to the word "δᾶ" is only vaguely Greek. Her calling upon Apollo contains only the simplest

syntax: the vocative particle and the vocative form of the name Apollo. This gradual revelation of Cassandra's ability with Greek teases the audience with the possibility (ultimately on realized in Aristophanes) of a character speaking non-Greek on the Greek stage. When she later claims to know Greek "all too well" we realize her linguistic gifts are like her prophetic ones the gifts of her encounter with Apollo, suggesting a link between sexuality and language which resonates through other Greek literature.

#### Works Cited

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