

Negotiating Literacy and Orality in the Derveni Papyrus

The Derveni Papyrus, since its discovery in 1962, has been an invaluable source for our understanding of Orphic religion (Betegh 2004b), early Greek philosophy (Burkert 1997), and most importantly for this paper, literary criticism (Henry, 1986, Sistakou 2010). In this paper, I argue that the analytical methods employed in the Derveni papyrus demonstrate that the commentator conceives of the Orphic texts as simultaneously written and oral. Previous scholars have examined interpretive techniques in the Derveni papyrus to understand the motivations of the commentator (Betegh 2004a), its connections to historical evidence of Orphic rites (Bierl 2014), and its relationship to broader trends in exegesis in Greco-Roman antiquity (Most 2016). I add to the existing discussion by viewing the commentator's allegorical interpretations through a new lens: a socio-historical approach to literacy and orality. I respond to Calame 2014 who identifies an interaction in the Derveni papyrus between speech and the written word focalized through religious Orphic practice. I set aside the religious framing, instead viewing the interaction of speech and writing identified by Calame through Thomas 1992's framework of orality and literacy in Ancient Greek society. Thomas argues that literacy and orality are superimposed concepts, and Ancient Greek society did not think of them as opposing poles but were able to draw from a range of strategies in the composition and interpretation of poetry. Thus, the Derveni commentator's analyses show a fluctuation between visualizing the Orphic texts as physically written down and processing the material aurally. Both ways of cognition are often present within a single analysis. The muddying of the oral and the literate in the Derveni Papyrus provides additional evidence against the (false) dichotomy of primitive oral cultures and evolved literate cultures.

In order to explicate the commingling of the oral and the literate in the Derveni Papyrus, I first demonstrate that the strategy of metathesis implies the commentator's engagement with a written text (Janko 2002 Col. VIII). I then turn to the use of wordplay based on phonetic similarity to show the commentator's use of orally/aurally-based interpretations (Col. XXII). Finally, I examine Column X in which the commentator argues through a series of substitutions resembling the transitive property in mathematics, that λέγειν, φωνεῖν, and διδάσκειν all come to mean the same thing. The collapse of various forms of communication indicates that the learned society of the Derveni commentator is one where both oral and written poetry circulates. Furthermore, the perceived distance is slight between what contemporary society would consider as differing modes of communication. Taken all together, these methods of analysis support the conclusion that the Derveni commentator is engaging with both written and oral texts for the Orphic lemmata he treats.

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