

Peitho in the *Oresteia*: Personified, Manipulated, Transformed

Before Gorgias, no extant Greek artist, poet, or cult-worshipper directly associates the goddess *Peitho* (often translated ‘Persuasion’) with rhetoric. In fact, the earliest extant sources depict *Peitho* with a marked lack of personal qualities, overshadowed by more prominent deities in erotic (Hes. *Op.* 73. Sapph. fr. 1.18; 96.29 V; Pind. *Pyth.* 9; fr. 123 (Snell); Ibyc. 288 PGMF) and, occasionally, in civic contexts (Hes. *Theog.* 337; Alc. fr. 64; Anacr. fr. 39). For the most part, from the seventh through the early fifth century BCE, *Peitho* maintains a traditional, non-descript role as an associate of Aphrodite (Sapph. fr. 90.8; Pind. *Pyth.* 4; fr. 122 (Snell); IG XII (2).73; MMA 1981.11.19; ARV 2.458.1). In the *Oresteia*, however, Aeschylus presents *Peitho* as a striking and significant figure. Also, without directly associating her with rhetoric, Aeschylus alters *Peitho*’s mythological tradition in a nuanced and transitional way worthy of consideration.

This paper argues that the new and unique features with which Aeschylus endows *Peitho* in the *Oresteian* trilogy are the same qualities which later Greek playwrights, sophists, and theorists will attribute to rhetoric. By way of argumentation, I analyze the five instances where *Peitho* occurs throughout the *Oresteia*: twice in the *Agamemnon* (*Ag.* 106; 385) and in the *Eumenides* (*Eu.* 885; 970), and once in the *Choephoroi* (*Cho.* 726). In each instance, I demonstrate how Aeschylus works within *Peitho*’s traditional representation (as can be examined in earlier art, cult, and literature) while simultaneously altering and stretching this depiction “towards rhetoric.” With *Ag.* 385, for instance, Aeschylus’ unprecedented change of *Peitho*’s genealogy gives her the unambiguous forcefulness which Gorgias will laud (*Enc.* 6, 12, 13, 14) and Plato decry (*Phil.* 58a-b; *Grg.* 452e; *Phdr.* 260a; 459b-c) in regards to rhetoric. In *Cho.* 726, Aeschylus’ unusual pairing of *Peitho* with Hermes associates her with the trickery of rhetoric, sophistic and otherwise (Soph. *Phil.* 102; Pl. *Grg.* 465b; Arist. *Rh.* 1408b5). Then, in

Eu. 885 and 970, *Peitho*'s magical power with civic speech resonates with other essential aspects of rhetoric as expressed by later playwrights (Eup. fr. 94; Ar. *Ran* 1391, *Nub.* 1397-98), writers (Hdt. 8.111; Long. *Subl.* 1.4; 20.1.3; Dion. Hal. 2.14; 3.126), and orators (Aeschin. *In Ctes.* 256; Isoc. *Antid.* 15.249.1-6). Finally, in *Ag.* 106, Aeschylus makes *Peitho* a Muse, patroness of the arts—including rhetoric—a connection which is continued in later sources (Ar.*Rh.* 1404a7; 1408b30-31; 1409a22-24; Long *Subl.* 39.3; Dion. Hal. *Dem.* 4.8; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.9-10). In short, with each of his manipulations, Aeschylus effectively transforms *Peitho* into a personification of rhetoric.