Aeschylus’ Hidden Muse: Agamemnon 104-106

In the opening parodos of the Agamemnon (Ag. 40-257), Aeschylus stages a choral narrative recalling the seduction of Paris, the Trojan War, and the cycle of destruction which this perpetuates upon the already-cursed house of Atreus. Central to the piece is a unique, albeit vexed, passage in which the Chorus of old men speaks self-referentially about their own singing (Ag.104-106). Before delving into details on Paris’s abduction of Helen, they remind the audience of their authority (κύριος, 104) and their strong ability (κράτος… ἀνδρῶν / ἐκτελέων, 104-105) to retell the events in persuasive song (πειθὼ μολπὰν ἀλκὰν, 106). While the exact translation of this choral reflection (and in its significance to the drama as a whole) has been subject to widely varying interpretation (Raeburn and Thomas 2011; Denniston and Page 1957; Fraenkel 1950), few scholars have specifically re-examined the term through which the Chorus assert their confidence in their musical effectiveness: πειθὼ. In this paper, I argue that at Ag. 104-106, Aeschylus not reflects on the nature of song, but he implicitly associates πειθὼ with the artistic inspiration and effectiveness more often associated with Muses.

In the first place, I provide a close analysis of Ag. 104-106 focusing specifically on the connection between πειθὼ and the words with which it is syntactically connected—θεὸθεν (105), καταπνείει (105), and μολπὰν ἀλκὰν (106). With this analysis, I argue for a potential understanding of πειθὼ as a semi-personified, divine agent, i.e., the goddess Peitho (Smith 2011; Stafförd 2000; Shapiro 1993). I then investigate genealogical connections between Peitho and the Muses such as their kinship with the nymphs in Hesiod’s Theogony (349) and with nurturing deities in Works and Days (73-74). As both an Oceanid and a companion of the Charites in Hesiod and in the words of other poets (Ibyc.fr. 288PGMF; Pind. fr. 123. 13-15 (Snell)), Peitho could fall under the category of nymph-like goddesses whose field of action can extend beyond
that of bodily/erotic beautification of youths to poetic inspiration (Maslov 2016; Larson 2001; Pirenne-Delforge 1991; Buxton 1982). And at Ag. 106, her powers of inspiration can even extend to a Chorus of weak, elderly men (Murray 2005). On this reading, Aeschylus anticipates a more expansive understanding of Peitho that emerges in later vase paintings and literature where Peitho is depicted together with the Muses, or even as a Muse herself (MMA 37.11.23; Plut. Quaest. Conv. 745c; Dio Chrys. Or. 1.9-10). In this way, Aeschylus’ association of Peitho with the poetic and inspirational power of the Muses (Ag. 104-106) reveals not only his reflective nature, but also the versatile potential of this personified abstract divinity.

Bibliography


