

**The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato.**  
*John Heath.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. vii + 392 pp.

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In *The Talking Greeks*, Heath traces the relationship between speech and identity in the ancient Greek world. Specifically, he argues that speech is the central axis of Greek conceptions of self-definition. Speech, according to Heath, provided the basis for the fundamental opposition between human and animal, while control of speech was the central criterion in the Greek categorization of the human Other: women, children, slaves, and non-Greeks. Heath does not discuss this development in the abstract, but provides detailed readings of how speech is deployed in three canonical authors who span the Archaic and Classical periods of Greek culture: Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato.

In chapter 1, Heath examines how speech in Homer articulates the human, animal, and divine realms. He shows that Homeric animals have the same basic psychological makeup of humans, lacking only the gift of speech (Achilles' prophetic horses are granted speech by the goddess Hera). Gods, likewise, differ from humans in their vocabulary and the distinctly divine quality of their voices. The dead are incapable of articulate speech, but screech incoherently. Speech also serves to differentiate between living humans in Homer: the (non-Greek) Trojans do not control their speech as well as their (Greek) Achaean counterparts, and women,

even powerful ones such as Helen and Arete cannot make their speech authoritative. Heath provides in chapter 2 a detailed argument for the maturation of Telemachus' ability to speak effectively in the *Odyssey*, and maintains in chapter 3 that in the *Iliad* Achilles' own development leads to his eventual transcendence of the conventions of heroic speech when he successfully convinces Priam at the end of the epic to lay aside his mourning for Hector and eat food.

Having traced the distinctions that speech engenders in Homer, Heath argues in chapter 4 that in the Classical period these distinctions colonize every corner of Greek thought, with the result that "control of speech is central to all Greek hierarchical thought about status" (p. 171). Women were ideally silent; non-Greeks were defined as non-Greek speakers, whose speech was incomprehensible to most Greeks, whence the Greek onomatopoeic term *barbaroi*, 'babblers.' Chapter 5 presents us with a detailed study of how persuasive speech is represented as the foundation of civilization in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Heath argues that Aeschylus' language blurs the boundaries between human, divine, and bestial until the establishment of the law court at the end of the trilogy, when Athena's persuasive speech creates a proper separation consonant with civilized existence. In his last case study, Heath examines Plato's representation of Socratic speech. Socrates viewed proper speech as not simply controlled and authoritative but also philosophizing; but his silencing of his fellow Athenian citizens through verbal domination in philosophical dialogue was seen as humiliating by Athenian elites, resulting in his prosecution. Socrates' refusal to live a life without philosophizing speech led to his acceptance of the death sentence handed out by his jury in 399 B.C.E.

These case studies are framed by an introduction and an epilogue that move in a different direction entirely. Heath doesn't simply assert that speech was an important measure (among others) of difference in Greek thought, but *the* crucial measure. Why? Because Heath wants to argue that (free) speech and critical examination of cultural norms were not only uniquely central to Greek civilization, but also that "Our vigorous public debate about affirmative action and the rights of illegal aliens and homosexuals rests on the cultural foundations laid out by the Greeks" (p. 21). The Greeks, Heath argues, had a "freedom of mind" that initiated a "heroic quest" to understand (Greek and non-Greek) humanity; the Greek categorization of their world preserved in our texts is itself the product of this pursuit (p. 23). In Heath's master narrative of Western history, Greek ideas about the proper use of speech, rationality, and critical disagreement are ultimately responsible for the collapse of the very hierarchical structures that they originally supported (pp. 174–177). In the epilogue, Heath discusses bioethics and the treatment of animals, and shows that modern attitudes toward animals and the supposed uniqueness of human rationality ultimately derive from ancient Greek thought. Ultimately, the lesson is that we need to be more Greek: we should "critically reexamine everything" (p. 330) with "the tools the Greeks handed down to us" (p. 333).

Heath's central thesis that speech is an important index of Otherness in Greek thought seems to me incontrovertible, although in places his argument is somewhat strained. For example, in chapter 3, Heath argues that Achilles' gentle treatment of Priam and his use of the story of Niobe as a mythological exemplum to convince Priam to eat again shows that Achilles has transcended Homeric cultural norms and "reveals that he sees the waste in his own anger, even as he seems to accept that such human failures are tragically inevitable" (p. 159). That is, Heath argues that Achilles rejects the heroic code itself (p. 145). Yet Achilles justifies his ransoming of Hector's body to Priam in the traditional terms of material compensation (*Il.* 24, pp. 592–595), which, as Donna Wilson has recently shown, are never rejected by Achilles in the *Iliad* (*Ransom, Revenge, and Heroic Identity in the Iliad*, Cambridge University Press, 2002). Moreover, Achilles' use of the exemplum would seem to assimilate himself to Apollo, the avenger, and Priam to Niobe. And Apollo's anger at Niobe was surely justified—Niobe, after all, arrogantly claimed to be superior to the mother of Apollo, the goddess Leto—as was his wrath at the Achaeans for dishonoring his priest Chryses (in both cases, the same word, *chōomenos*, is used to describe his anger; p. 159). Thus, the story of Niobe would make a poor exemplum with which to portray Achilles rejecting the heroic code, since it indirectly presents the death of Hector as justified. Rather, Achilles affirms his own inevitable mortality and mortal suffering, and he establishes solidarity with Priam through shared grief and the proper performance of death ritual.

Elsewhere, Heath diminishes the power of his model by failing to relate it to other cultural domains. For example, Heath's persuasive reading of the animal-human polarity in the *Oresteia* could be profitably linked to other central oppositions in Greek thought, such as female-male and nature-culture, as discussed by Froma Zeitlin (*Playing the Other*, Chicago University Press, 1996:87–119). As Heath notes, Zeitlin does not include the animal-human antithesis in her analysis, and Heath is perfectly entitled to argue that the animal-human dichotomy is primary to the structure of the *Oresteia* (p. 217 n. 4). Yet surely the way in which

speech is linked to other fields in Greek thought is crucial to understanding its ideology and how that ideology is reflected or organized in specific texts.

Generally, I find most problematic Heath's insistence that speech is *the* measure of difference in ancient Greece and his resultant failure to discuss or incorporate alternatives to his thesis. In the earliest Greek literary traditions, food and sacrifice crucially distinguish civilized humans (who eat cooked meat) from uncivilized humans (who eat plants or meat raw, or are cannibals), animals (who are eaten or eat meat raw) and gods (who eat ambrosia and enjoy the aroma of the burnt bones and fat of the sacrificial animal), as shown by the Hesiodic accounts of Prometheus and Pandora, not to mention by the *Odyssey* itself (*The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, University of Chicago Press, 1989; *The Odyssey in Athens*, Erwin Cook, Cornell University Press, 1995). Heath also dismisses without argument the problems associated with taking language as the principal measure of Greek self-definition (p. 30; see especially *Hellenicity*, Jonathan M. Hall, University of Chicago Press, 2002:111–117). Analyses of cuisine and difference suggest that other dichotomies are important to understanding Greek ideologies of speech and language. As Heath himself observes, characteristics of the Other often appear in sets rather than singly, suggesting that more than one axis of difference is crucial in explaining Greek thought. That is, there seem to be multiple and overlapping criteria used in defining Otherness, including cuisine, gender and the body, that should be investigated together as part of a conceptual and representational grid of relations.

Heath's analyses are highly learned, insightful, and well researched—no easy feat, given the enormous scholarly literature on the many topics he discusses. While almost all of the Greek is translated into English, *The Talking Greeks* is addressed primarily to Classicists. Nevertheless, this book will certainly be of interest to anthropologists interested in the role of ideologies of language in shaping thought about social difference. After all, at its core Heath's book addresses the crucial role played by Greek ideologies of language in cultural expression and change, then and now.

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