

Freedom of Speech in Homer and Virgil?

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If you follow the news you will have seen how dictators and military leaders have ruthlessly tried to crush democracy and freedom of speech in Burma and East Timor. This is nothing new: governments (including many in this country) often try to silence some of their citizens to a greater or lesser extent. People are kept quiet not just because of what they have to say, but sometimes simply because they wanted to speak up in the first place.

Why is this? It is because of a basic truth about human nature: people in charge have a nasty habit of silencing those who are under their control. 'Don't answer back!' 'Speak when you're spoken to!' 'Anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you!' 'Silence in court!' In different ways, those in charge, whether they are judges, policemen, prison officers, schoolteachers, or parents, rely on expressions like these to enforce their authority. The ability to shut people up is a sign of power. In fact, the ability to shut people up – by whatever means – might be what power in society is really all about.

The gagging of Thersites

Homer showed this over two and a half thousand years ago with a famous episode in the second book of the *Iliad*. It involves a cheeky Greek soldier called Thersites who always tries to be funny by making jokes at the expense of his commanders. Thersites dares to challenge the authority of his leader, Agamemnon, by suggesting that the Greeks should give up the war against the Trojans and go home. He is immediately put in his place by Agamemnon's fellow commander, Odysseus. Odysseus has no interest in what Thersites has said: he is more worried about the fact that someone of such low rank has spoken up in the first place.

Odysseus threatens to strip Thersites of his clothes and give him a thorough beating – and also hits him with a gold sceptre to show he means business. So Thersites' attempts to urge his fellow soldiers to return home have been utterly in vain.

Curiously, all the other common soldiers admire Odysseus for silencing Thersites. 'This is by far the best deed Odysseus has accomplished', they say, 'to keep this abusive babbler out of the assembly. Never again will his proud spirit set him to compete with kings with words of reviling.' That response from Thersites' companions always seems a bit odd to me: Odysseus may be a 'superhero', but he certainly does not care much for the needs of the ordinary troops. The rights and wrongs of this incident in the *Iliad* have been debated for centuries, and by political thinkers as well as by specialists in Classics.

Whatever we make of the behaviour of Thersites and of Odysseus' reaction, and whether or not we agree with the verdict of all the other common soldiers, at least Homer shows that ordinary people can and do open their mouths in front of their superiors. In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, servants address their masters, children talk to their parents, and women – who do not usually rank very highly in the world Homer describes – answer back to men. So even if Homer himself disapproves of lowly or inferior people speaking up, at least he accepts that they often do so. In the end, Homer shows us that there is a clear connection between speech and power and allows us to make up our own minds about it.

Virgil's censorship

Unfortunately, the attitude of the Roman poet Virgil seems to be very different. His poem, the *Aeneid*, is well known for being a kind of Latin follow-up to the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But in contrast to Homer's poems where the characters are always talking, there is hardly any conversation in Virgil's *Aeneid* at all. Instead of conversation, Virgil's characters mostly make a single unanswered speech. Many people have noticed that Virgil does

not usually show his characters conversing, but no one has ever really explained why this is. The reason is very simple: most of the speeches in the *Aeneid* which get no answer are made by individuals who are more important than the person or people they are speaking to. Those who are spoken to do not want to answer back, or else they feel they cannot.

For instance in Book 4, when the all-powerful god Jupiter gives instructions to Mercury (his divine messenger) to be passed on to Aeneas, Mercury obeys without replying because Jupiter is more important than he is. Mercury delivers the message to Aeneas who is 'dumbfounded' with fear at the actual sight of a god. Aeneas, in turn, does not reply, because Mercury is far more powerful than he is as a mere human. One example of someone in the *Aeneid* who does not speak at all is the princess Lavinia. She is important in the story because Aeneas will be able to marry her after defeating Turnus, but she has no power because she is a young girl. We see her blush in Book 12, but we do not hear a single word from her. It might have been very different in Homer.

There are some occasions on which characters do converse and actually exchange speeches in the *Aeneid*. But these are in situations in which the characters have the same amount of power. The extended conversations between Aeneas and his lover Dido in Book 4, for instance, can occur because Aeneas and Dido have an equal rank. Both are leaders of their peoples. Generally in the *Aeneid*, there are those who have the right to speak in the first place, those who have the right to reply, and those who have no right to speak or reply at all. In Virgil's world, far more than in Homer's poems, it seems to be the privilege of those in authority to speak and the habit or duty of those with less power to remain silent.

The case of Ascanius

If you are interested in looking more closely at 'freedom of speech' in the *Aeneid*, Ascanius is a very interesting character to consider. Ascanius (or 'Iulus', as he is sometimes called) is the young son of Aeneas. He is put in a variety of situations through the poem. As a child, in the presence of his father, he is normally seen and not heard. But Ascanius can speak when his father is absent. For example he is the first to approach the Trojan women and tell them off for setting their ships on fire in Book 5. The women make no reply, and scatter in all directions. The one time we do hear Ascanius trying to speak in his father's presence is in Book 7. It is an important moment in the story. Is it entirely a

coincidence that Ascanius is silenced on this occasion, when he speaks in the company of his father? This seems to be the only example in the *Aeneid* of a character who might be speaking out of turn. Otherwise, there are no uninvited speeches and no impertinent individuals (like Homer's Thersites) who interrupt, butt in, and speak to their superiors before being spoken to.

Dictated poetry

Why is it that in Homer people lower in status are able to speak first and answer back, when there is hardly any freedom of speech in the *Aeneid*? This is a difficult question and we can only guess at the answer. The fact that Homer's and Virgil's poetry were produced in very different times and circumstances might provide some clues.

The epics of Homer probably date from the last part of the 8th century B.C. Nothing is known about their author, and it is not even certain that they had a single author. Those epics must have evolved gradually and were not produced in a specific place or a specific time. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were heard all over the Greek world by all kinds of audiences. To some extent those poems must have been produced by the same sorts of people that they were designed to entertain. Homer's audiences probably expected to hear people like themselves speaking in the poems they enjoyed. The *Aeneid*, on the other hand, was written in a specific time (26–19 B.C.) by a specific man (Publius Virgilius Maro) who is said to have been given a specific sum of money (ten million sesterces – a ludicrously vast amount!) by the emperor Augustus. And many have come to the conclusion that the *Aeneid* was designed to meet a specific need: to justify Augustus' questionable regime, a regime which privileged the Roman aristocracy, which discouraged promotion of the lower classes of freedmen, and which cynically controlled the masses.

Like modern dictators, Augustus sought a system of complete control: laws were passed which regulated marriage, family life, and religion. Such a system of complete control is reflected, and worse, promoted in the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* portrays a world in which humans obey gods, women obey men, children obey parents, and soldiers obey commanders. The purpose of all this obedience is never questioned. Freedom of speech was not one of Augustus' priorities, to put it mildly. Virgil realized this. He

also realized that the best way for a dictator to win an argument about freedom of speech is not to have an argument at all.

Andrew Laird teaches Classics in Warwick University – they even let him lecture! His recent book, Powers of Expression, Expressions of Power (Oxford, 1999), explores the connections between speech and authority – mostly in Roman literature. If you want to find out more about the campaign for freedom of speech and democracy in Burma, write to Burma Action Group, Collins Studios, Collins Yard, Islington Green, London N1 2XV.