

Paronomasia and riddling speech in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*

Matthew Fox

(as delivered at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association, San Francisco, CA, January 4, 2004.)

My paper this morning revolves around the meaning, or rather the multiple simultaneous meanings, of a *hapax legomenon* at line 91 of the *Homeric hymn to Hermes, polyoineseis* (#1 on handout). There Hermes, having stolen Apollo's cattle, runs across an old man in Onchestos, to whom the tricky young god addresses the lines in question. "Old man, you digging your plants with crooked shoulders, / you'll be *polyoinos* [have much wine] whenever all these things bear, / and having seen be not seeing and *kophos* [deaf and dumb] having heard, / and keep quiet when it does not harm your own here." I will argue that *polyoineseis* is a pun on the particularized Odyssean epithet *polyainos*, meaning both "much-praised" and "much-praising." *Oinos* and *ainos*, wine and praise, are deeply interrelated, as we'll see. Both are ambivalent; each is a basis for true friendship and a lethal weapon against enemies. Both are the concomitants of social community, where wine and praises flow, each acting as exchange currency for the other.

As commentators have noted, Hermes' speech is riddling. For one thing, the conditional protasis of "you'll be *polyoinos*" has no obvious apodosis; its link to the injunction to silence, if any, is left implicit, to be guessed at. In fact, textual critics, sensing a lacuna here, have presumed to fill in the supposedly "missing" line. But this is unnecessary. The passage is fine as it stands.

For more is going on than meets the eye, or ear. That the lines are meant to be enigmatic is made more certain by the fact that this is a traditional type-scene, one that recurs in *Odyssey* 24, when Odysseus finds his aged father Laertes working his orchard. Instead of greeting him outright he decides it would be "more profitable" (*kerdion*) to disguise himself and, first, praise the old man's gardening skills, and then abuse the old man about his old age and ragged appearance. The abuse is double-entendre, of course, because he says he is ragged, but has the appearance of a king, and thus hardly deserves such harsh conditions. Here motivation for the scene seems lacking, except to establish once again that Odysseus has a particularly cruel sense of humor.

But the similarities to our passage are striking: like Hermes, Odysseus addresses Laertes as *geron* "old man." Laertes is in his *aloe*, orchard or vineyard, digging his "plant" (*phuton*) just like the old man of Onchestos—who, moreover, "observes" Hermes (*enoese*) just as Odysseus "observes" Laertes. Finally, the occurrence of *ouk ampelos* "nor vine" in Odysseus' first lines establishes what I claim is a pun at *Hermes* line 90 *epikampulos* "crooked" or "hunched over." A pun between "crooked" (*epi-kampulos*) and "grapevine" (*ou-k ampelos*) is precisely to the central point being argued. Synonyms for "crooked" often describe cleverness or deceptive, even lying, speech, as with "crooked-crafted Kronos" (*ankulometis*), or the "crooked judgments" (*skoliai dikai*) in *WD* 219. Indeed, Hermes laconic speech to the old man is full of punning language; we can note now in passing the classic pun in line 93, *me ti* "not any" but also *meti* "by *metis*" or "craft," a pun that the *Odyssey* exploits in the Cyclops episode and elsewhere.

So Hermes' speech is enigmatic. As an anonymous rhetorical handbook tells us (handout #5), the figure of *ainigma* is an "expression made up for obscurity, so as to conceal what is intended." It gives several examples with glosses, including "Don't stir fire with a knife," meaning, it says, "Don't provoke someone who is already angry." *Ainigma* differs from *allegoria*, it goes on, because the latter is for exhortation or warning or for sacred matters, but *ainigma* is just obscurity for its own sake. We can, I think, doubt the grammaticus on this last point, for even his examples show that *ainigmas* are usually encoded moral injunctions, warnings or bits of pointed advice. *Ainigma*, then, like the older and related *ainos*, was a form of coded speech that, being opaque and riddling, called for and enjoined on the addressee the need to interpret what is being said. The substance of *ainos* speech was to exhort, instruct, inform, warn—as well as to praise, blame, and ask favors—in artfully covert language. *Ainos* was an elaborate and multi-faceted art-form of performative rhetorical practice. It distinguished the wise and sharp-witted from the dull-witted and stupid; it could gain one friendly kindnesses and necessities in times of need, as well as save from harm in times of danger. Odysseus, the *polyainos* hero, is its consummate embodiment, the savvy, smooth-talker who can praise, cajole, or lie his way into or out of any situation, turning it to his advantage with the double-edged art of *ainos*.

In the tool-kit of *ainos*, puns were a crucial and often used instrument. The trope of paranomasia, as another anonymous rhetorical handbook relates (handout #6), is "whenever by slightly altering some part of what is understood as the intention (*dianoia*) of words or phrases, we shift it toward another thought (*ennoia*)." This, he says, is also called "resemblance, alliteration" (*parachesis*) as when Demosthenes says, "Aren't you ashamed Aischines" (*ouk aischunei Aischine*). The punning in these examples is obvious and overt. In archaic *ainos*, on the other hand, the puns are by and large covert and left implicit, requiring the listeners to understand what is really meant and supply the hidden meanings for themselves. It is this un-explicit nature of many traditional puns that makes them enigmatic or riddling. As in Hesiod's well-known *ainos* of the hawk and nightingale, no explicit interpretation is offered, it is merely addressed to "kings who are discerning" (*basileusin phroneousi*, WD 202). Moreover, in this *ainos*, the nightingale (*aedon*) is an obvious pun for its coded referent, the singer (*aoidos*). The puns encoded in an *ainos*, in other words, often provide the key to its successful interpretation.

The pun on *oinos* and *ainos* is traditional and well-attested. So at *Olym.* 9.48-9, Pindar sings "praise (*ainei*) wine (*oinon*) that is aged, but the flowers (*anthea*) of new hymns" (handout #3). Here not only is praise punned with wine, but the conceptual opposition of the old and young appears (as in our Hermes passage), with the additional metaphorical pairing of wine and songs (*hymnoi*). Both wine and song are in turn metonyms of the total social context of male conviviality.

Again in the Theognidean corpus, we read "Wine, I praise and blame you" (*oine, ta men s'aino*, etc.) (handout #4a) "nor in all ways can I hate you or love you. You are good and bad. Who can blame you, and who can praise you, possessing a measure of wisdom (*sophie*)?" Here, in transparent terms, we are presented the complex punning theme of *oinou ainos*, the praise—but also the riddle—of wine. Wine is both good and bad, and those who are *sophos*, wise, will understand how it calls for both praise and blame. Of course, praise and blame themselves are thematized here, as is the requirement for "measure" *metron* and discernment in meting out either one in any given situation.

Interestingly enough, the Theognis text follows with another passage comparable here. After telling his own *thumos* to be youthful (*heba moi*), the narrator says “Drink wine, which for me from the peak of Taygetos the vines bore, which an old man grew, in the foothills, Theotimos dear to the gods” (handout #4b). Once again, in the wider immediate context of *ainos oinou*, the praise of wine, we hear the theme that contrasts youth with old age, coupled with the georgic image of an old man tending his vines and making wine.

But if we go back for a moment to the lines in Theognis right before the “praise of wine,” the other basic dimension of *ainos* speech comes into the picture: the crucial distinction between friends (*philoï*) and enemies (*echthroï*), and the double-standard ethics this entails (handout #4a). The narrator swears a solemn oath: “may wide heaven fall on me if I do not aid those who are *philos* to me, and to those who are *echthros* bring grief and be a great pain.” Here *anie*, “distress,” itself seems to pun on *aino*, “praise,” in the next line, while *oine*, “wine,” itself ambivalent, is sandwiched between the two.

This complex of ideas, the ethics of reciprocity between friends, allied together against common enemies, which in turn involves double-edged wine and duplicitous speech-acts, helps shed light on the unstated link between Hermes’ declaration that the old man will be *polyoinos*, on the one hand, and on the other, his injunction against speaking too openly about what he has seen or heard. Once again the *Odyssey* provides us evidence for the relationship between *oinos* and *ainos* and how both, in turn, are situated in the ethics of friendship allied against enemies. The Cyclops episode is paradigmatic (handout #7). Odysseus and his comrades, in lethal danger, deceive their enemy with wine, pretending just to be sharing usual friendly relations with him. Having drugged him with wine, Odysseus inflicts the coup de grace, and tells him in “honey-smooth words” (*epessi meilichioisi*) his deceptively punning name: *outis* which turns later into *metis*. Both wine and words prove disastrously deceptive in this case, as Odysseus’ comrades blind the drunken, vomiting giant. Note that the Cyclops enjoys the wine *ainôs*, “dreadfully” (line 353), an adverb which promptly recurs to describe the stake that glows “dreadfully” (ln. 357). The singer here is winking at us.

On the other hand, when Odysseus in book 14 delivers his consummate *ainos* story to the swineherd Eumaios, which gains him in reward a cozy cloak to keep him warm through the night, he opens it with an extended praise of wine and its effects on a man’s behavior and speech (handout #8a). After praising wine, he declares, I wish I were young (*heboimi*). At the end of his story Eumaios addresses him, “old man, you’ve spoke a blameless *ainos*” and it is, he says, “not without profit” (*nekerdes*) (handout #8b). Here, once again, *oinos* and effective *ainos* speech go together, as does the theme of youth vs. old age. They are, indeed, perfectly reciprocal: an *ainos* speech begins by praising *oinos*, and receives the appraisal of being, in fact, an efficacious *ainos*: he gets a warm cloak for the night.

Ainos speech, then, is a calculating, cunningly conceived, and flawlessly executed speech-act. It establishes relationships of friendship and enmity. It can blind man-eating giants and win cloaks even when extra cloaks are lacking. Thus Hermes’ injunction to the old man, to be willing to dissemble his true knowledge when it is in his interest, or even when his own interests are simply not in danger, sounds like a lesson in *ainos* speech. And of course the entire *hymn to Hermes* plays on the basic, and basically related, themes of the dangers of truthfulness and the profitability of deception. The only thing Hermes

does not say is *ainos*, which of course he does, by punning on its conceptual twin, *oinos*. Wine and praise, the one entails the other.

Before concluding with my decoded reading of the *hymn to Hermes* passage, I have one small digression. So far the focus has been on how *oinos* and *ainos* go together in the context of social conviviality. At dinner wine and praises flow. But, I was surprised to find that the terminology of vine-tending also uses a metaphor not impertinent to the passages we have been looking at. The buds of the grapevine were called *ophthalmoi* “eyes,” as a fragment of Alcman attests, among other places (handout #9). Not only this, but other terms from the sphere of vision were also used; in particular, a “blind” (*tuphlos*) bud was one that did not produce (see handout #10). The 10th century CE agricultural handbook *Geoponica* tells the vinetender to separate the “blind” eyes from the good ones, so that the few remaining will grow more fruitful. A sacrificial blinding, as it were, of some vine-buds was carried out to allow those surviving to thrive. Thus, not only does the language of vision in Hermes’ speech (“having seen be not seeing”) take on a further punning resonance in the context of budding vines (*anthousan*, as it says at line 87), but also the blinding of the wine-sodden Cyclops perhaps takes on new, though still to be explored, levels of traditional reference.

But my time runs short. I conclude, then, with a decoded reading of Hermes’ riddling speech to the old man of Onchestos, one that takes into account the lines’ many punning references. Hermes, spied in the midst of capital theft, addresses the old man tending his newly budding vines: “Old man,” he says, “you hunched over digging those twisted vine plants, you’ll be rich in wine and praises—if you hear my pun—whenever you refer to all these things here [2nd sing. middle, w/o iota subscript], both what you’ve seen be unseeing and deaf having heard, and silent when by craft your own may be harmed here.” This four line speech-act, in other words, is an intricately wound *ainos* that is a lesson in *ainos* speech itself. The manifest level of reference is a praise of the old man’s vineyard, coupled with an order to keep what he’s seen to himself. But the coded meaning is that if the old man hears the hidden meanings and takes the lesson in *ainos* speech, he will indeed be *polyainos*, that highest of praises, to be declared, like Odysseus, one who knows the powerful craft of cunning speech, which overwhelms enemies and wins accolades from loving comrades.