

Matthew FOX

Paronomasia and Riddling Speech in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*

The *hapax* at *H.h. Hermes*, 91, *poluoinêseis* (“you will have much wine”), is typically read as Hermes’ promise of an abundant grape harvest to the old man of Onchestos who recognizes him stealing Apollo’s cattle, if he’ll only keep quiet about what he has seen (*kai te idôn mê idôn einai kai kôphos akousas, // kai sigân hote mê ti katablaptêi to son autou*, 92-3). This interpretation is correct, as far as it goes. But I also read in this passage an unnoticed paronomasia, or pun, on the crucial Odyssean epithet *poluainos* “much praise(d).” Recognizing this pun (equating “wine” and “praise”) yields an abundant payoff for our understanding of this enigmatic passage, the general thematics of the *hymn to Hermes*, and of riddling speech in other texts like the *Odyssey*. To establish the pun on *oinos/ainos* at *h.H.* 91, I cross-reference other passages in Greek epos and in cognate IE traditions (Indic, Old English, and Old Norse). My examples suggest that the type-scene here links *h.H.* to an IE myth concerning the origins of poetry, that is, speech inspired by ritual intoxicants (mead, ale, wine, soma). Seeing this, *h.H.* as a whole becomes the fullest Greek instance of a myth that Watkins (1995: 72) has argued is of general IE inheritance.

As Nagy argues (1999: 234-42; 1990: 145-98), *ainos* denotes a speech-act that directs (allusive) praise at its addressee, with the aim of gaining a gift or reward in exchange. As such, *ainos* is at the center of a rich notional web of reciprocity ethics, concerning relations of proper friendship and its opposite, that defined archaic oral culture. One’s skill in decoding an *ainos* message defines one’s relation to the speaker. Hence the “veiled speech” of *ainos* has power both to honor and aid friends (*philoî, hetairoi*)-those “wise” (*sophoi*) to its message-and to injure with blame enemies (*echthroî*) who do not get the message. Other IE traditions share this culture of praise reciprocity and the relation-defining power of wise speech. In the Old Norse *Poetic Edda*, for instance, the High God Odin outlines the ethics of hospitality; one gnomic verse reads, “The fool thinks all who laugh with him are friends; he doesn’t notice even if they say cruel things about him when he sits among the wise” (*Havamal*, v. 24). As speech that dissembles to discern the wise from the unwise, *ainos* compares with Vedic *brahman* (“prayer, expansive speech, riddling utterance”); Old English *rûn* (“rune, secret, secret counsel”) and *ræd* (“advice, counsel, plan” but also “gain, profit, help,” whence *rædels* “riddle”) with cognates in Old Norse.

Within the rich arsenal of traditional IE poetics for this sort of “secret speech between friends” paronomasia holds a high place (cf. Watkins 1995: 30, 68-193). I cite lexical connections between terms for *praise-poetry*, social ritual *intoxicants*, and the semantics of honorific *gift-exchange*. Old English (and Old Norse) has *me(o)du* (“mead”), *mēd* (“reward, pay”), *mærð* (“glory, fame,” as active verb: “praise”), and *mæðel-* (“give a speech”); also *lið* (“wine, cider”), *leoð* (“song, poem”), *lof* (“praise”), and *leof* (“dear, loved”). Vedic has, among others, *soma* (“soma, ritual intoxicant”) and *sama* (“praise-song” for the ritual soma-drinking). Greek examples link *ainos* and *oinos*: positively, when Odysseus praises *oinos* at the beginning of his *ainos* to Eumaios (*Od.* 14);

negatively when Odysseus outwits his bad-host enemy the Cyclops with both *oinos* and dissembling speech (his trick name: *outis/mētis*) (*Od* 9).

Thus my reading is as follows: Hermes' "promise" of much wine (*poluoinos*) is a veiled lesson in the poetics of *ainos*-speech, with the encoded message, "you will be *poluainos*-if you hear my pun-whenver you refer (*pherein*) to all these things you've seen, be unseeing, and deaf to what you've heard, and keep silent when it does your own no harm." In sum, Hermes bestows on the old man the highest praise (to be called *poluainos*), if he is able to hear it through the paronomastic dissembling of *poluoinos*.