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The Myth before the Myth Began

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Abstract: An extension of earlier studies on the semantics of *muthos*, with attention to the language and perspectives of early Greek mythographers. Various mediated forms of story-telling about the mythical and historical past, orally and in written form, are examined. [*Forthcoming, Proceedings of UCLA Conference on Mythography (April 2009)* http://www.cmrs.ucla.edu/programs/conference_myth_program.html]

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The clouds preceded us.
There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
venerable and articulate and complete.
From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
that is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.
(Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*)

Two decades ago, a contextual analysis of the Greek noun that gives us the word ‘myth’ led me to the claim that it means, in Homeric poetry, an ‘authoritative utterance’, and that *muthos* represents a unitary speech-act term comprising subcategories of rebuke, command, and recollection.¹ This paper is an attempt to fill out the rest of the story. How does one travel, in terms of the semantics of *muthos*, from its Homeric meaning to the more familiar sense in which the word signifies something much more like our ‘myth’ -- an unverifiable, probably fictional, account of gods and heroes, supernatural beings, or distant ancestors? Such is the sense that the word seems to bear already in the 5th century BCE, at least in the work of the historian Thucydides, if not that of Pindar and others. While the full story still remains to be told in detail, here is an initial mapping of the territory for such a future project.²

¹ R. Martin, *The Language of Heroes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp.10-88.

² I am thankful to Józsi Nagy and Kendra Wilson for accommodating my slow thought processes, providing in the form of the April 2009 conference at UCLA the ideal venue in which to present ideas that have been simmering for the past twenty years.

The semantic history of the term ‘myth’ is relevant to the present collective volume for several reasons. Mythography, first of all, does not occur in a vacuum. Whatever the medium--writing, acting, singing, or oral story-telling-- those urges that motivate people to gather, fix, record, propagate, and employ mythic stories must be investigated in terms of context and social function. Semantic analysis, in this regard, is nothing less than the investigation of culture, in this case, that of the so-called ‘archaic’ period (roughly 750-500 BCE) in Greek-speaking lands. When recording or transmitting a *muthos*, how did the individual distinguish the relevant piece of lore or verbal art from other utterances, and what was the result, in terms of the development of ‘myth’ collections?

Second, mythography implies *myths*, plural: telling one tale does not make a mythographer. As it happens--perhaps surprisingly, to those bound up in print culture--circumstances for the accumulation and agglomeration of myths *do* exist *prior* to any writing down of the myths. In other words, there are socio-poetic templates and protocols even in an illiterate culture that shape the recording and selection of myths (and even, what to call myths) once that culture turns to the new technology of writing. The gradual transformation of the semantics of *muthos* from the sense of ‘authoritative utterance’ to ‘fiction’ should be seen as part of this social process. Essentially, the process illustrates the reinterpretation of an (older) speech-act as a (newly recognized) genre of speaking. But the genre itself--as such things do--gets attached to particular people and situations, determined far in advance of any categorization.

These particularities we can see at work in stylized form already in Homeric epic in the archaic period. But traces of the sociopoetic processes that transform the meaning of *muthos* can still be detected in the writings by and about the first Greek mythographers, those authors of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE whose work survives only in fragmentary condition. These men, the earliest of those we know to have been engaged in collecting and collating stories of the past, are usually considered from a retrospective viewpoint grounded in the brilliant ‘intellectual revolution’ that centered on 5th-century Athens. Thus, they are more often heralded as proto-historians (albeit of a primitive

type).³ But if we choose instead to see them in relation to the eras that precede them, the mythographers turn out to display the habits, motivations, and methods that one sees already in Homeric depiction of myth--or, more specifically, of *muthos*-telling. In short, one can detect a continuity between the dynamics of *muthos*-as-speech act and the eventual, static product, a 'myth' in a book--a familiar modern artifact, but already, an ancient invention.

Let us, then, think first of *muthos* as constituting the 'myth before the myth began'. A *muthos* was 'venerable and articulate and complete' inasmuch as the various speech acts by this term in Homeric poetry seek the tone of authority; are never open ended; and always have a point. They *aim* for completeness, for a conclusion. It is probable, in fact, that the root underlying the noun form *muthos* is that found in the Greek verb *muô*--meaning 'to close' the eyes or mouth. From the same root we have the words *mystêrion* (mystery) and *mystês* (initiate), in both of which the notions of closure, and of being closed off or excluded, are operative.⁴ In *muthos*, in the proposed sense of 'authoritative utterance', one sees a slightly different growth out of the action of 'closure': that found in English 'conclusion' (from Latin *con-claudo*, 'close up')--a speech-act that trumps and prevents further speech-acts.⁵

Now, of the 160 or so speeches designated *muthos* in Homer, about two-thirds seem to have nothing to do with storytelling, and so the *muthos*-to-myth linkage looks at first sight rather unlikely. The regularly employed kernel form of a *muthos* in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* is a command, of the sort Agamemnon makes to the old priest Chryses at the start of the *Iliad*, ordering him to leave and never come back begging for his daughter in the Achaean camp (*Il.*1.26-32). 'He enjoined a *krateros muthos* [a hard speech] upon him', which Chryses obeyed' (*Il.*1.25; cf.1.33). Out of the larger group of speeches identified by the poet or his characters as *muthos*, however, we can specify a smaller

³ For an account of Hellanicus and Hecataeus from this vantage point, see L. Pearson, *Early Ionian Historians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).

⁴ On these connections see G. Nagy, *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) p. 32.

⁵ On the parallel semantics of Latin *concludo* see *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) s.v. 1a. 'confine, keep secret' in conjunction with 5b. 'define, state expressly'; and *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue Latine*, 4th edition, ed. by A. Ernout and A. Meillet (Paris 1959), pp. 125-26.

subgroup that one could just as easily translate with ‘story’ rather than ‘speech’. Or more accurately, they can be viewed as speeches with supporting evidence. When Agamemnon tells a disappointed Chryses to go home, he does not have to indulge in details.

Agamemnon is commander of Greek forces and holds the rod of power, the *skêptron*; although the priest holds the *skêptron* of Apollo, might beats right in this case. But in other cases, the stylized poetic representations show that one has to explain *why* he or she has the authority to speak or act in a certain way, including the giving of commands.

Thus, ‘speech’ or ‘utterance’ segues into ‘story’, and often leads to a story about the past that shores up one’s present positioning in society. Another way of putting this is to say that no *muthos* in the sense of ‘story’ (straightforward as the tale may seem) ever comes unaccompanied by the force of *muthos* in the sense of authoritative speech-act. Myth-stories *do* something *for* you and against your opponent.

It is interesting, speaking of the *skêptron*, that this material symbol of power in the imaginary world of Homeric poetry has its own relationship to *muthos* meaning command, but also to storytelling. For instance, Odysseus, the good lieutenant for the bad commander Agamemnon, acts as enforcer and sets about beating those who refuse to fall into line after the abortive troop-rousing attempt in Book 2 of the *Iliad*. He tries to get the rank-and-file to listen to their leader. The poet says ‘Whatever man of the common people he found yelling, that man he kept driving with the *skêptron* and kept berating with a *muthos*, saying “strange man [*daimoni*]--sit still and listen to the *muthos* of other people” ’ (*Il.*2.198-200). A bit earlier in the poem, we had learned that this very sceptre had a back-story of its own. Hephaestus the smith god made it; the first recipient, Zeus, gave it to Hermes. From him it passed to the mortal hero Pelops, who gave it to Atreus, who upon his death left it to Thyestes, from whom Agamemnon got it (*Il.*2.102-08). In short, when a common grunt gets hit with a stick and an order, there is a story to back this up--if the *skêptron* could talk it could tell quite an authoritative, venerable tale. Surely its owner, Agamemnon, can *recite* the same story, whenever it is called for, but usually he does not have to. Put another way, behind every *muthos*-command is such a latent, explanatory *muthos*-story, detailing why the speaker commands consent. The story, detached from its context, will eventually look and feel, to later Greeks and then to us, like ‘myth’. Imagine the ‘genealogy’ of the sceptre, for instance, removed from the

immediate context within which the story clearly undergirds kingly authority: it sounds like an innocuous tale, useful for establishing relative chronology, and the prestige of an artifact, but not much more.

In Homer, these *muthoi* that precede and create the ‘myths’ are finely articulated, usually long, tales. Their venerable quality comes from being put into the mouths of sage figures like Phoenix, the advisor of Achilles, and Nestor, the preternaturally aged warrior from Pylos. I will touch on two stories by these men, whom I shall name ‘sages’, then on two stories by warriors. (Of course, Phoenix and Nestor and almost everyone else in the *Iliad* are warriors, as well, but it is their role as sage advisors that becomes foregrounded in the poem.) This rather artificial division of tales by the status of their tellers will function as a heuristic device when we then turn to the corpus of early Greek mythography. What will emerge is in part a tale of continuity, but one with an interesting breakpoint.

To begin with the ultimate storyteller, Nestor: in Book 11 of the *Iliad*, he is in his hut recovering from battle when Patroclus, the companion of Achilles, enters to find out the latest news about who has been wounded. Nestor proceeds to entertain or harangue Patroclus with a speech 150 lines long, in which he recalls in great detail a cattle raid, a reprisal move against the men of Elis, and evidently his first experience of fighting.⁶ This is an initiatory tale, the reflection in Greek epic of a sub-genre of ‘boyhood deed’ stories such as we find incorporated into the Old Irish saga *Táin Bó Cuailnge*.⁷ Usually, the *Iliad*

⁶ For a thematic analysis of the speech, see R. Martin, ‘Wrapping Homer Up: Cohesion, Discourse, and Deviation in the *Iliad*’, in *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman textual relations*, ed. by A. Sharrock and H. Morales (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷ On the origins of the Greek tales of raids, see, P. Walcot, ‘Cattle Raiding, Heroic Tradition, and Ritual. The Greek evidence’, *History of Religions*, 18 (1979), pp. 326-351. For the relationship of Homeric epic to the Irish material, see D. F. Melia, ‘Some Remarks on the Affinities of Medieval Irish Saga’, *Acta Antiqua Hungarica*, 27 (1979), pp. 255-61. On the later development of this subgenre, see Joseph Nagy *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985).

chooses to suppress such tales of pre-Trojan War conflict.⁸ After describing how he was forced to go to the post-raiding battle on foot, because his father thought him too young to fight in a chariot, Nestor draws the paradigmatic conclusion: *he* fought for his community, but Achilles is refusing to battle for the greater good. Patroclus is expected to relay this story to his companion. And to seal the message, Nestor brings up another recollection: how at the start of the Trojan expedition he and others went to the home of Achilles and Patroclus, and what their respective fathers had said. In other words, Nestor is ventriloquizing--almost morphing into the form of--the young fighters' fathers. Achilles had been told to excel and be superior to others; Patroclus (says Nestor) had been told to act as advisor to Achilles (*Il.*11.783-90). Nestor's own advice is for Patroclus to recall this function, so that he might beg Achilles to let him wear the hero's armor and enter the fray as a sort of decoy. Of course, this sage advice of Nestor will soon get Patroclus killed.

To be as transparent as possible: like many speeches in the *Iliad*, this one is *not* framed with reference to either *muthos* or its contrasting lexical item, *epos* (word). What justifies including Nestor's speech here as *muthos*? The overall typological study of the 160 or so thus designated speeches shows that long recollection, along with commands and flyting (the exchange of blame language) are the speech genres marked by the term.⁹ By extension, with attention to its function and similarities to other such utterances that are explicitly marked, we can safely call Nestor's recollection a *muthos*. Supporting this point is the fact that when Nestor himself refers, within the speech, to his earlier attempt to persuade Achilles and Patroclus to join the expedition, he calls that utterance a *muthos* (*Il.*11.781). We can imagine his signature rhetoric as it would have unfolded in that episode, and thereby extend the term he has applied to it to this example of the same rhetorical act.

It may be significant that persuasion in the *Iliad*, even in the form of a *muthos* like Nestor's, so often goes wrong. Very often, persuasive rhetoric half works. I am still not

⁸ The *Odyssey* does deploy one such story of initiation, to great effect, in the famous flashback concerning how Odysseus acquired his scar: *Od.*19.392-466.

⁹ Details in Martin *Language*, pp. 45-70

sure what that means.¹⁰ Another example, even more elaborate than Nestor's, is by the sage figure Phoenix, who makes his one and only speaking appearance in Book 9. He fails to get Achilles to agree to re-enter battle, but at least prevents him from storming off in his ship within hours, as he had threatened. Phoenix begins his *muthos* (again not explicitly so designated) with autobiography, as had Nestor--a Faulkneresque tale of sleeping with his father's concubine and having to leave town, then of his service as Achilles' guardian, getting spit up on by the baby hero, and so forth (*Il.*9.434-95). He turns next to an allegorical paradigm: Achilles should not reject the Achaeans' gifts and entreaties, because Prayers personified (the *Litai*) are daughters of Zeus and deserve honor (*Il.*9.502-14). Finally, Phoenix brings up a tale not related to his personal biography--the story of Meleager, who hid himself away in anger at his kin during an attack by the Curetes, and despite the entreaties and promised gifts of his family and his community of Calydon, did not emerge until it was too late. He never got the gifts--re-enter battle now, says Phoenix to Achilles, and *you* at least won't miss getting paid (*Il.*9.524-605).

These are examples, then, of tales about the past being recollected by persons at least partly involved, in order to persuade a listener about the right course of action. Phoenix's speech is the more interesting because--like many story-telling events recorded by ethnographers--it is a messy combination of folkloric genres: autobiography, parable, and what actually resembles "myth"--a story of a hero, Meleager, whom he did not personally know, but whose story has become emblematic of how one should not act.¹¹ We easily detect the 'myth' within the *muthos* in scenes like this: such a tale, denuded of the surrounding context and its rhetorical framework, could slide without alteration into a

¹⁰ The Homeric poet's attention to failed rhetoric seems to be of a piece with his concern for differentiation in speech-style, even across ethnicities, on which see H. Mackie, *Talking Trojan: Speech and Community in the Iliad* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

¹¹ On the combination of genres marking typical Egyptian epic tale-telling events, for example, see D. Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

handbook of 'Myth'. But what needs stressing is the tale's function as language-in-use: it is not a static set-piece but a constituent of various dynamic speech-acts.¹²

Next to these figures of older men who dispense advice to Achilles, we can place two scenes involving younger warriors. Diomedes in the *Iliad* is explicitly a neophyte, one whom Nestor identifies as not yet having reached the perfection of speaking *muthoi* (*Il.*9.55-56). In Book Four, Agamemnon picks on him. The troops are preparing for battle. The commander says to the young Diomedes, in winged words 'why are you cowering?' That was not the way Tydeus acted (Tydeus being the father of Diomedes): Agamemnon proceeds to tell how Tydeus had once visited his own home city, Mycenae 'but I never met him or saw him'. In other words, for Agamemnon this story is already folklore, if not myth. Tydeus, he goes on to say, later went to Thebes, annoying the inhabitants by challenging them all to deeds of strength and winning, thus so enraging the Thebans that they ambushed him on the way home. Tydeus killed 49 out of the 50 sent against him. Agamemnon does not elaborate on Tydeus' later career at Thebes--how for instance he was caught gnawing the skull of a dead enemy. But he leaves the sting in Diomedes: such a man was better than you in battle, though you are better at talking. Diomedes does not deign to reply (*Il.*4.364-400).

The point is that Agamemnon uses a *muthos*/command and a *muthos*/story to back it up in the mode that scholars of Old English and Norse saga call 'flyting'--this is elaborate blame, meant to spur on the addressee to fight.¹³ A similar flyting event comes in Book 6 when the same Greek Diomedes enters the battle and confronts Glaucus, an ally of the Trojans. Diomedes speaks first, asking Glaucus whether he is a god (as he is not supposed to fight divinities). Even a mighty hero of the past, Lycurgus, lost grievously when he tried to fight the divine Dionysus, observes the young Diomedes. He proceeds to tell the tale, in a dozen lines (*Il.*6.130-41). It sounds like myth, a story of gods and humans in the past, yet it has a context and a point. Even though it is not personal

¹² An excellent further survey on oral storytelling in Homer, with broader discussion of innovation, and an extended folklore bibliography is L. Edmunds, 'Myth in Homer', pp. 415-441 in I. Morris and B. Powell, edit., *A New Companion to Homer* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

¹³ A useful summary is Ward Parks, 'Flyting and Fighting: Pathways in the Realization of the Epic Contest', *Neophilologus* 70, (1986), pp. 292-306.

history, it remains highly relevant to the personal situation at hand. (One can, by the way, understand the whole sequence as ironic, basically ‘trash-talking’ on the part of Diomedes). He ends up saying ‘if you are not a god--come and fight, so that you sooner enter the coils of destruction’ (*Il.*6.142-43)

Now the camera shifts to Glaucus, who, instead of being rattled, has his own *muthos* and myth to tell. He traces the lineage of the trickster of Argos, the mortal Sisyphus, and then talks about the grandson of Sisyphus, Bellerophon, the Chimera, and the ancient hero’s experience with a seductive woman, the whole tale sounding like it comes from a handbook of mythology. Only at the end of the long story do we learn that Bellerophon is in fact Glaucus’ own grandfather (*Il.*6.206). So myth--in the sense of tale-telling about the heroic past--is employed in the service of self-presentation in the heroic present.¹⁴ It is also meant to take the wind out of Diomedes. Remarkably, the Greek has a comeback: he claims that his own grandfather Oineus acted as host for Bellerophon long ago in Argos, for twenty days, and they gave each other gifts. This makes the grandsons guest-friends, too, and therefore they should avoid one another’s spear, says Diomedes (*Il.*6.215-26). The scene can be read as all the more brilliant if it is in fact ‘myth’ in the later Greek sense of lying fiction, an improvisation (unverifiable on the spot by Glaucus) that saves his opponent’s skin. Diomedes is the one who, after all, appears to rook Glaucus right after this speech, cornering him into giving up his gold armor in exchange for Diomedes’ bronze gear worth slightly more than one-tenth its value.

In sum, the *Iliad* shows us story-telling tied to *muthoi*, whether of long sage recollections that act as paradigms or slightly shorter genealogical tales that function to challenge warriors. A fairly straightforward conclusion about Greek mythography can be made at this juncture. Whether the *Iliad* records conditions in the 12th, 8th, or 6th centuries BCE, or some amalgam thereof, we glimpse a world in which there are living, breathing myth anthologies. Sage-advisor figures must possess a repertoire, based partly on their own experience, but including famous precedents of the past. One story alone does not suffice; persuasion requires versatility and variety. Not surprising, that. But

¹⁴ Note that Glaucus in his tale quotes his father Hippolochus (son of Bellerophon) as having told him to excel and be superior to others (*Il.*6.208), exactly the words that Nestor quoted as having been uttered by Peleus to Achilles (*Il.*11.784), in a speech where Nestor mythologized his own past by way of offering a paradigm for behavior.

warriors, it emerges, are *also* men of *muthoi*, walking tale anthologies, and they, too, must have a ready stock of stories, at least relating to their own genealogies and their claims to authority. The latter requirement is illustrated most strikingly in the wonderful opening scene of the Old Irish story of Mac Dathó's Pig, in which the awarding of the champion's portion has to wait until every hero has had his say about how his own tribe defeated the others. The talk runs something like this: 'Our people killed your brother'. 'Oh, well I cut off your friend's head'. 'Yes, well I'm the one who cut off your father's hand', says another warrior. 'Forget that-- I'm the one who put out your eye with my javelin', and so on until the warrior Conall Cernach arrives, just as another, Cét, is about to carve the animal and award the 'hero's portion'.¹⁵

'Get up from the pig now', said Conall. 'But what should bring you to it?' asked Cét. 'It is quite proper', said Conall, 'that you should challenge me! I accept your challenge to single combat, Cét', said Conall. 'I swear what my tribe swears, that since I took a spear in my hand I have not often slept without the head of a Connaughtman under my head, and without having wounded a man every single day and every single night'. 'It is true', said Cét. 'You are a better hero than I am. If Anlúan were in the house he would offer you yet another contest. It is a pity for us that he is not in the house.' 'He is though', said Conall, taking the head of Anlúan from his belt, and throwing it at Cét's breast with such force that a gush of blood burst over his lips. Cét then left the pig, and Conall sat down beside it'.¹⁶ Laconic rhetorical statement is topped with a visceral flourish, the corporal evidence to back up Conall's assertion.

The Greek material is less direct, and its warrior *muthoi* are more prone to cite a more distant past, the deeds of father and grandfathers. But the upshot is the same: fighters need the equivalent of a handbook knowledge of stories, their own and their opponents', to rate as players. Warriors turn out to be as much transmitters of 'myth' as bards and wise men are.

¹⁵ The tale is most readily available in J. Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); Irish text in *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, ed. Rudolf Thurneysen (Dublin. 1935).

¹⁶ Translation from N.K. Chadwick, *An Early Irish Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927).

It is time to turn now from the roots of the mythographic enterprise, as glimpsed in Homeric poetry, to the branches and flowers, appearing in fragmentary writings of the Classical period attributed to men collectively known as mythographers. In Greek they are called various things, and since the citations of their words and works are usually in much later authors, it is hard to know what a contemporary term would be to describe them. *Logopoiios*, ‘account-maker’ (as used by Herodotus at 5.125.1) would probably be the best bet.¹⁷ I pass over with only a sideways glance the all-important 6th century, but it is in that era that the transformation of *muthoi* (in the sense of stylized speech-acts) into ‘myths’ (in the sense of pure stories of the past) must have gained ground. Marcel Detienne, in *The Creation of Mythology*, would go so far as to suggest that the spread of writing, which enabled the recording and comparison of widely varying versions of what people had previously thought their own true stories, brought about a new semantic development, in which *muthos* came to mean something like our modern ‘myth’ in its sense of *false* story.¹⁸ But Detienne’s analysis has to be revisited, especially since his reading of Pindar’s use of *muthos* in his 5th-century victory odes just does not hold up. Pindar, instead, can be seen to use *muthos* as a neutral ‘story’ or even as in Homer, as an act of speaking. But that is another story.¹⁹ Relevant to Pindar and to the development I have been mentioning is the survival into the 5th century of a genre of speaking based on the advising function of *muthos* that we have seen at work in the *Iliad*. Leslie Kurke usefully lists all the compositions that we know about in which a mythical advisor figure

¹⁷ On this word and the later *logographos*, see *Early Greek Mythography*, ed. by R. Fowler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) xxiii-ix; *Hecataei Milesii Fragmenta* ed. by G. Nenci (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1954) xxii; Pearson, *Historians*, pp.6-9; and C. Calame, *Mythe et histoire dans l’Antiquité grecque* (Lausanne: Payot, 1996) pp. 41-45.

¹⁸ M. Detienne, *The Creation of Mythology*, translated by M. Cook. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). See also Calame pp. 9-18.

¹⁹ The few instances in Pindaric poetry, *pace* Detienne, only acquire the sense of false story by being modified by negative adjectives (e.g. *Ol.1.29: dedaidalmenoī pseudesī poikilois--muthoi*, ‘stories elaborately adorned with variegated lies’; cf. *Nem.7.24-5*). Further detail in R. Martin, ‘*Nemean 7* and Pindaric Hymnologic,’ (forthcoming). Note that even Aristotle in the 4th century BCE can preserve a neutral sense of *muthos* as simply plot or story: Calame, pp.26-28.

instructed someone.²⁰ These include the Instructions of Cheiron the Centaur; sayings of Rhadamanthus and Pittheus; and a logos of Nestor to Neoptolemos, composed by the sophist Hippias of Elis (cf. Plato, *Hipp.Maj.*286a5). From the perspective of Homeric poetry, this shows a continuity of presentational technique: it is the act of speaking, set in a distant past, that authorizes the content of these directive utterances, usually rather bland but useful stuff like ‘be good to your friends’ and ‘respect your parents’. Once again, a medieval Irish parallel comes to mind in the genre of *tecosca* or ‘instructions’, attributed to various mythic and heroic characters such as Morann.²¹

Given the symbiotic relation of *muthos* to myth, of command, recollecting, and flying to the deployment of actual ‘mythic’ stories, already at an early period, can we see any survivals of these contexts of utterances when real mythography--the writing down of stories--actually starts in the late 6th or early 5th century BCE? The following investigation involved reading through the authors contained in Robert Fowler’s excellent new edition of the mythographers (while feeling very much in need of the promised second volume, containing notes and commentary). Ninety percent of the citations from the twenty-nine mythographers collected by Fowler are not particularly helpful in answering the question of the continuity of performance or presentation habits. We usually learn, often via later marginal notes to authors like the 3rd century BCE poet Apollonius Rhodius, that a certain mythographer had told a different version of some story. Sometimes all we discover is that mythographer *X* had also used the unusual word *Y* in his version of events. That is the nature of the fragmented ancient evidence. But on other occasions we can glean something of the circumstances, methods, motivations, and reception of the mythographers. And when we do, the picture looks remarkably like the Homeric depiction of *muthos*-deployment. That is to say, sages and warriors are the predominant templates, if only metaphorically. Even when writing down myths, from whatever their sources, these authors, almost all prose writers, are working with the

²⁰ L. Kurke, ‘Pindar’s Sixth Pythian and the Tradition of Advice Poetry’, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 120 (1990), 85-107.

²¹ See the edition by Fergus Kelly, *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), and on the parallels with Hesiodic and Homeric embedded passages of the advice genre, see R. Martin, ‘Hesiod, Odysseus, and the Instruction of Princes’, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 114 (1984) 29-48.

problems and urges of the Homeric *muthos* speakers. Here is a brief mythographic dossier that can illustrate the point.

The figure of the sage advisor is represented by at least one 5th-century mythographer, Pherecydes of Athens, who flourished around 465 BCE.²² The Byzantine encyclopedia known as *Suda* ('Fortress') dates from the 10th century CE, but has been shown to contain good information dating back at least to Hellenistic scholars of the 3rd century BCE, and earlier to Aristotle. According to the *Suda*, Pherecydes is credited with inventing prose--a new art form, to which the canonical poetic tradition gradually yielded in the course of the 5th century (*Suda* phi 216 = 4.713.23 Adler). He wrote about Athenian history--which is to say, largely Athenian genealogy-- in a book appropriately called *Earth-Born Men*, (as the Athenians considered themselves autochthonous). Like many, he is tied to the transmission of Orphic traditions, which are all-pervasive in the 6th and 5th centuries. But most interesting is the *Suda*'s note that links Pherecydes to a composition in hexameter verse called *Paraineseis*, or 'Advisings'. For this word can describe the sort of speeches made in the *Iliad* by Nestor and Phoinix, as well as the later poetic work attributed to Theognis of Megara in the 6th century.²³ The *hupothêkai* ('instructions') and related works surveyed by Kurke are in the same tradition (although she does not mention Pherecydes). In other words, we have a figure writing down the lore of his native city-state, involved in religious or ritual lore (tied to Orpheus) and also penning the sort of *muthoi* one can find in Homer, in the same meter as Homeric verse. Pherecydes of Athens strikes one as being like a verbal equivalent of the so-called 'bilingual' pots, those vases from the early 5th century BCE that feature the newer technique of red-figure painting on one side and the older black-figure on the other, sometimes depicting the same mythological scene.²⁴ I list him as "sage" because his genre of *parainesis* is that of the advisors we have seen.

²² The most complete study is now P. Dolcetti, *Ferecide di Atene: Testimonianze e frammenti* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2004).

²³ For the social context and poetics of Theognis, see G. Nagy and T. Figueira, edit. *Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

²⁴ On the pottery type, see B. Cohen, *Attic Bilingual Vases and their Painters* (New York: Garland, 1978).

Another famous mythographer from about a generation earlier (circa 560-480 BCE), flourishing around the time of the Persian Wars, is Hecataeus. The historian (and part-time mythographer) Herodotus has something of a competition going with Hecataeus, since he, too, is an Ionian, from Asia Minor, and also traveled to places Hecataeus went. As we see in a passage from Book Two (143.1-4), Herodotus is pleased to take Hecataeus down a notch. When his predecessor went to Egypt, and told the priests he could recite his own genealogy extending back for sixteen generations, they smiled indulgently (so we imagine) as they led him through their own line-up of statues of past eminences, by which they reckoned back twice as long. *Their* lineage did not go back to a god; so how could that of Hecataeus? At least, that seems to be their point. We never learn what Hecataeus responded, but this is a neat example of deflation through multicultural contact. Is the *muthos* cherished by Hecataeus, regarding genealogical self-presentation, a lie? Or just an unfortunate example of Hellenic naiveté?²⁵ Another significant point arises from the tale: we see the mythographer Hecataeus doing what Homeric heroes did in their own self-presentation, toting up their own heroic past, tracing their lineage back to the gods whenever possible, and boasting about it. Either Diomedes and company possessed the mythographic habit *avant la lettre* in the form of an oral-traditional accomplishment. Or, to be open-minded about dating, the composer of the Homeric epics was already in touch with the developing mythographic habits of local writers, perhaps in Athens of the 6th century BCE.

If a Greek mythologized himself, by recording an ancestry that reached back sixteen generations to the gods, this might seem harmless enough, albeit an obvious power-play in performance, from our vantage point. In the absence of documentation--that is, in any oral culture--the assertion of Hecataeus can go unchallenged (like that story Diomedes tells about his grandfather). It is "sage" behavior inasmuch as it is venerable and complete--not subject to the warrior-style of flyting and counter-myths. When the person doing the genealogizing is a doctor, however, we are on the cusp of another style. As we know from the work of Geoffrey Lloyd and others, doctoring in the ancient world

²⁵ The contemporary philosopher Heraclitus, also an Ionian, apparently thought the latter, as he lumped Hecataeus with Pythagoras, Hesiod, and Xenophanes in a set of those whose broad erudition (*polumathiē*) did not impart intelligence (12 B 40 DK = test. 1 Nenci).

was a competitive activity, making use of public display and agonistic diagnosing.²⁶ Thus, when Hippocrates of Kos traces his lineage twenty generations all the way back to Heracles, son of Zeus, and Asclepius, son of Apollo, we are looking at some serious credential claims. The mythographer who steps onto this playing field is putting into action something more like a warrior use of *muthos*. Pherecydes (among others such as the learned Eratosthenes) apparently approved the Hippocratic boast (Soranus, *Life of Hippocrates* = 175.3 Ilberg). Pity those poor doctors who could not enlist their own genealogists to document similar bloodlines. Again, we are talking about self-assertion and self-presentation, by means of ancestry tracing---not unlike the proud statement of Glaucus in the *Iliad*, that he descends from Sisyphus, son of Aiolos, who was grandson of the original post-Flood human survivor, Deukalion.

With this mention of the other prominent *muthos* style, let me turn to some more noticeable ‘warrior’ traits in Classical mythographers. Perhaps the most famous declaration of the allegedly new Ionian spirit in enquiry comes from Hecataeus of Miletus, as preserved in the later work of Demetrius *On Style* (Ch. 12). ‘Hecataeus of Miletus thus declares with authority (*hôte mutheitai*): I write these things as they seem to me to be true. For the tales told by the Greeks are, as it appears to me, many and absurd.’ We should translate the verb *mutheitai*, which derives from *muthos*, with the full force of that noun as we see it in Homeric poetry. Otherwise, if we translate as ‘makes a fiction’ or even more neutrally ‘tells a story’, the mythographer’s opening manifesto loses its force. What he means to say is that what we will read in his work on genealogies is true--the opposite of *muthos* in the later sense of ‘fiction’. For ‘tales’ (the untrue stories that he finds absurd) he uses the Greek word *logoi*. At the same time, however, we should note the slight dissonance between his declarative *mutheitai*-- in the third person--and the phrase ‘as they appear to me’ (*hôs emoi phainontai*) with its reference to the first person. Part of this style we come to see later in Herodotus and Thucydides, both of whom refer to themselves in the third person in the prooimia of their historical accounts. But in those authors, there is no ‘me’ in close vicinity. The effect in Hecataeus might be to increase

²⁶ G.E.R. Lloyd, *The Revolutions of Wisdom* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987) pp. 83-108.

the emphasis on the authority of his utterance. It sounds legalistic, more like ‘Hecataeus attests’ to the following.²⁷

One man’s silly stories, of course, are another’s truths--always the problem with myth. We wonder, when reading passages like Hecataeus’ history of the early Aetolian kingship, how many other somewhat implausible events got seriously recorded by Hecataeus as part of his *Genealogies*. According to this narrative (Athenaeus, *Epit.*2.1 = Fowler fig. 15), Orestheus, son of Deucalion, on his way to assume the kingship, found that a dog of his gave birth to a stalk (*stelekhos*). He ordered the stick to be buried and from it there grew a vine with many clusters of grapes. He therefore called his son Phytios (“Productive”); a grandson was named Oineus (“Winey”) after the vine, who became father of Aitolos, the eponymous ancestor of the region’s people. Perhaps the stick the bitch birthed has significance beyond its apparent role in the story---after all scepters too are sticks. Achilles in the *Iliad* talks about Agamemnon’s as if it were a dead branch (Il.1.234-39), that will never more produce (*phusei*) leaves and branches. The stalk produced by Orestheus’ dog, on the other hand, is marvelously productive. Who would defend this story? Plenty of Aetolians, no doubt. What does Hecataeus owe *them*? We don’t precisely know, but one can easily imagine the flyting of myths and counter-myths in which this sort of story makes sense, claims to kingship being pretty serious things.

The evidence suggests that Hellanicus, another mythographer of the 5th century, is entangled in just such claims and counter-claims.²⁸ This time they are not about kingship but about a kin-slaying queen. The *scholia* (marginal notes) to line 9 of Euripides *Medea* (produced 431 BCE) include an apparently widespread story, that Euripides got paid five talents by the Corinthians to blame Medea for killing her own children. Previous versions of the tale, we are meant to conclude, blamed the Corinthians themselves--or, if you believe Didymus (the ‘Bronze-Gutted’ scholar almost exactly

²⁷ On the paradoxical expression, see further Calame p. 30. Nenci xxiv-vi explains the sentence as referring to the absurdity of there being multiple versions of each story, all posing as true: polyphony is the mark of the phoney. Pearson p. 98 sees an allusion to Hesiod’s Muses (*Theogony* lines 27-29) who tell both truth and fictions like the truth.

²⁸ On his mythographic, as opposed to ethnographic and chronographic writing, see Pearson pp. 157-93.

contemporary with the Augustan poet Horace--it was the relatives of Creon (Medea's victim) who had the children killed and then blamed Medea for infanticide. The existence of a reparation ritual at Corinth seems to argue for an old version in which the Corinthians are to blame--or, at least, blamed themselves. The story as given in *scholia ad Medea* line 264, citing the grammarian Parmeniscus, is an aitiological tale, according to which it was the women of Corinth who slew the children at an altar of Hera. When a plague struck the city, an oracle specified expiation to appease the wrath of Medea's children and Hera through the annual sending of a delegation of seven boys and seven girls who were to live and sacrifice in the goddess's precinct.²⁹ Now the scholia tell us that the mythographer Hellanicus as well as the mysterious writer Hippys are sources for details of the life of Medea in Corinth. Could Hellanicus also have promoted this story about Medea's guilt, that absolves the Corinthians and puts an Athenian playwright--Euripides-- in a bad light? Both authors are named two sentences after the mention of the bribery tale, although it is not directly attributed to them. Perhaps this is a fetch too far, but if we consider the motives and opportunities of the case, it is not insignificant that Hellanicus comes from Lesbos. He is said to have lived from about 490 to 405--that is, he was almost exactly contemporary with Euripides. And we should not forget that Athens did some cruel things to Lesbos in the later 5th century. After the unsuccessful revolt by Mytilene from the Athenian empire in 427 BCE, the Athenians voted to slaughter the entire male population. Only second thoughts and a last-minute intervention saved the town. Even at that, 1000 rebels were executed.³⁰ There were several important citizens of Lesbos, which is a big, rich island. But it is interesting that Hellanicus is said to have come specifically from Mytilene. The Athenians had their own reasons for demonizing Medea, ancestress of the Medes, after the Persian War. But Hellanicus (whose *polis* was nearly destroyed by the Athenians) would have excellent reasons to believe that the Athenians were corrupt and not to be trusted.

²⁹ On the associations of this cult with apotropaic and initiatory rites, see S.I. Johnston's full analysis, 'Corinthian Medea and the Cult of Hera Akraia,' in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, ed. by S.I. Johnston and J. Clauss (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 44-70.

³⁰ Thucydides, *Histories*, 3.50.

The agonistic use of myth, then, continues the flyting, blaming, agonistic use of *muthos* as we see it in epic. You might object that the world of the early 5th century BCE is not that of heroic duels. Yet, in a way, it is so even more. Consider the normal conditions in which someone setting out to record ‘myths’ in that century would find himself. It is a commonplace that all politics is local: so is myth. Pausanias reports (2.1.1 = Fowler fig. 1) that the land of Corinth is named after Corinthus. ‘That Corinthus was a son of Zeus, I have never known anybody to say seriously--except the majority of the Corinthians’. Pausanias says further that Eumelus, a member of the powerful Bacchiad family, and the supposed author of an epic poem *Corinthiaca* (though Pausanias is hesitant about the attribution) explained that Corinth had formerly been named Ephyraea (after a daughter of Ocean) but Marathon, an Athenian who had fled to the area and lived there some time, allotted the land to his son, after whom it got its new name. We do not know how or why Eumelus switched the paternity of Corinthus from a god to a mortal (albeit a heroized mortal, in Attica, to which he later returned).³¹ Perhaps this represents a convenient compromise, or even a minority ideology fostered by the ruling Bacchiad family: note Pausanias’ phrase ‘the majority’ of the Corinthians when referring to the belief in Corinthus as son of Zeus. It has the advantage of linking an ancestral figure with Attica, a way of making a claim either of guest-friendship or territorial ownership. As great-grandson of the Sun (Helios), Marathon is related to Medea, whom, as we have seen, at least one segment of Corinthian society desired to disown. Most likely, we are viewing dimly a faction fight fought on the mythopoeic level, in which every small re-adjustment of the story packs a punch for some interests: myth once more as *muthos*.

In these conditions, it is inevitable that mythographers either take sides, or eventually are perceived as doing so. This is no doubt a commonplace in medieval studies, when every minor kingdom, monastic site, and bishopric jostled for authority and used saga to establish its claims. Glastonbury and Arthurian myth come to mind. The city-state configuration of Classical Greece is not much different in discursive practices. Spreading literacy, shifting political tides, and the need to claim land all collaborate in

³¹ There may be a further rationalizing urge at work, as a story was also attributed to Eumelus that pinpointed a location in human terrain (in Lydia) for the birth of Zeus (Lydus, *Mens.* 4.71). Fowler (p.109) attributes the testimonium to Eumelus ‘Pseudepigraphus’.

putting mythographers on a rather hot seat. Why would a Hellanicus or Hecataeus even attempt to construct a universal Greek genealogy of all city states? We have no explicit reference to their motives. But just as Homer is depicted in the *Lives* tradition (circa 6th c BCE in origin) as a poet who wanders into town and produces a composition about local history, for which he is rewarded, so too mythographers must either have, or expect to gain, patronage.³² Eumelus, the poet and member of a powerful clan, is a sort of aristocratic gun-for-hire. The prose-writing *logopoiói*, on the other hand, might be of middling origin but they no doubt learn from their poetic brethren. And the poets themselves are still in the game, by the way, through the 5th century. At the end of *Nemean 7*, a complex ode written for a victorious athlete from the island of Aegina, the poet Pindar says (lines 104-5), ‘I do not have to keep repeating myself, like people forever babbling “Dios Korinthos” [i.e., ‘Corinthus comes from Zeus’] Pindar thereby aligns himself with people who are tired of Corinthian propaganda or inimical to the city’s power, and at the same time, with a segment of Corinth’s population (represented at one stage by Eumelus) who felt the same way, when they demoted Corinthus from son of Zeus to son of Marathon.

That mythography was never neutral can be imagined from the few examples already given. One senses that sometimes rather strange variations in detail--not obviously involving the claim to power--were concocted simply to give myth-recorders more status. How else might one explain the information given us by the mythographer Acusilaus that the Golden Fleece, affirmed by most people to have been golden, was in fact purple? (*scholia* ad Ap.Rhod. 14.1146-48= Fowler fg. 37). Does Acusilaus know something most people do not? Does he have a privileged source for this minority view? Or is this a case of providing authentic, realistic detail (as he apparently said it *became* purple “from the sea”)? On other occasions, mythographers seem to be picking fights with poetic predecessors just to appear more rational, or even simply for the sake of differentiation from tradition. Hecataeus, for instance, writes with some disdain: ‘Aigyptos did not go to Argos, but his children did--fifty of them, as Hesiod has it

³² For the ‘Homeric’ practice, see R. Martin, ‘Read on Arrival’, in *Wandering Poets in Ancient Greek Culture Travel, Locality and Pan-Hellenism*, ed. by R Hunter and I. Rutherford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 80-104.

[literally ‘made it’ i.e. in poetry: *epoiêse*], but, as I think, not even twenty’ (*scholia ad Eur. Orestes* 872 = Fowler fg. 19). Whatever the motive behind that move--rejecting as it does the common poetic trope of fifty offspring (Nereids, daughters of Thespius, etc)--it makes life easier for the genealogist to get rid of thirty extraneous characters.

In some cases, nevertheless, already in antiquity the mythographers’ cover was blown. Strabo the geographer lived more than three centuries after Hellanicus, yet he may have a reliable tradition at his disposal when he fingers his predecessor as gratifying (*kharizomenos*) the inhabitants of Troy who were the mythographer’s contemporaries by writing that their little settlement was actually the same as the great city of Priam (Strabo 13.1.42 = Fowler fg. 25b). Hellanicus, in gratifying the audience of Ilium, acts in a manner that is hardly different from the hired praise-poet’s relationship with the commissioning patron, a relationship of *kharis* or reciprocal gratitude.³³ We need not attribute this interpretation to Strabo, who writes with considerable hindsight. It is not unlikely that the ideology of ‘reciprocal gratitude’ was operative in the world of the 5th-century prose writers as it was of poets.

Pindar, as his odes show, was highly conscious of avoiding the appearance of paid partisanship. Praise has to look natural, acclaim must seem immediate and universal. His solution was to resort to an elaborate rhetorical system in which the athletic victories that he was paid to celebrate somehow organically and spontaneously elicited his exertions as laudator. He strove and exercised his art as hard as did his victors because their glory demanded his poetry and *vice versa*.³⁴ Here it seems we can find another parallel with the mythographers, but one that takes us in a different, unexpected direction. If, as I have been suggesting, the *muthos*-asserting tactics of Homeric imagination actually structure the later writing down of myths, we might think that the force of self-assertion, the threat of a live performance with its power to overwhelm opposition and gain consent, is somehow diminished or even defused by the use of the new technology. Doesn’t writing

³³ On the representations in literature of this archaic notion, see B. MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace: "Charis" in Early Greek Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). For analysis of the *kharis* relationship in Pindaric praise-poetry, see L. Kurke, *The Traffic in Praise: Pindar and the Poetics of Social Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

³⁴ Salient examples of these tropes are discussed in the classic study by E. Bundy, *Studia Pindarica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

change everything? Is not the ‘graph’ in mythography a key? Not necessarily. We are far enough now from the Great Divide theories of orality and literacy, as propagated especially by Eric Havelock and Walter Ong, to begin to appreciate phenomena that in fact jump the gap, continuing oral habits into the written world. Mythography is one such phenomenon. Starting from oral-performative roots, it flourishes even in the allegedly harsher climate of script. Eventually *muthoi* get stripped of their immediate contexts of use, with all the original pragmatic variables of speaker and setting, and become pretty stories--hero-tales and genealogies. But, as should appear from the examples already cited, that eventual outcome--the purely cleaned-up and motiveless tale--has not yet come about by the 5th century BCE. Sides are still being taken, ‘myth’ has still the immediacy and authority of *muthos*, and it fits the gratification culture of *kharis* in patron-client relations, provided we substitute, on occasion, city-states and their factions in the place of aristocratic individuals and families. And of course, the former are in most *poleis* simply transformations of the latter, as the history of Athens well shows.

Looking at the situation in this way may help us understand two final and rather odd stories. You could call these myths of mythography. They both have to do with writing, and they crop up in the biographies of mythographers. Pherecydes--whether the Athenian or the earlier man of the same name from the Cycladic island Syros--is said to have taught Pythagoras, but was himself an autodidact. Or, not quite. Pherecydes acquired knowledge, and trained himself (*heauton askêsai*) by the book: specifically, the secret books (*apokrupha biblia*) of the Phoenicians (*Suda* phi 214 =Fowler fig.1).³⁵ We learn from the *Suda*, as well (*alpha* 942 =1.87.20 Adler) that Acusilaus of Argos had a similar experience. His composition called *Genealogies* was written ‘from bronze tablets’

³⁵ H. Schibli, *Pherekydes of Syros* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 81 believes the story is about the man from Syros and sees the reference to Phoenician books as part of a doxographic tradition that argued for general Near Eastern influence on Greece, stemming from Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-50 CE). Fowler, following Jacoby, places the *Suda* testimonium under ‘Pherecydes Atheniensis’ (fig. 1). Dolcetti, pp.28-31, outlines what she sees as the *funzione politica precisa* of the genealogical work by Pherecydes of Athens in connection with the politics of Cimon. If the story of knowledge from books does relate to the Athenian (rather than the man of Syros), it could act as a protective device to defend the mythographer’s genealogical work against charges of partisanship. The immediate context in the *Suda* passage, however, is about eschatological and cosmogonic writings.

(*ek deltôn khalkôn*) which emerged in the course of a building project involving the excavation by his father of part of his house.

It is not the historical or archaeological likelihood of these discoveries that fascinates one so much as the insistence on *distance* in the myth-learning process, spatial in the case of Pherecydes, temporal for Acusilaus. Such distancing makes sense if the closeness and the personal self-assertiveness of archaic myth-telling has indeed remained a problem for slightly later myth-writers. Saying ‘I say this’ sets you up to be challenged. On the other hand, finding the story already packaged, whether written down in *biblia* by Phoenicians or engraved on tablets by previous residents of your property in the Bronze Age, lets you tell the untrammelled and de-personalized truth. Even the opening sentence of the work of Hecataeus (*hōde mutheitai*) encapsulates this paradox: to hold off challenges, the writer distances himself, using the third-person instead of the first, while employing a verb that must retain the sense of ‘makes an authoritative assertion’.

If mythography, finally, results in the endless stripping away of situation, a denuding of speech-acts in favor of pure plot-lines, we have to recognize the roles and motivations of mythographers in the process. They are not ethnographers, and certainly not interested in providing thick descriptions of the tale-telling event. The tales survive precisely because they *are* deracinated, made available for public consumption and re-performance in a number of contexts, defused for purposes of entertainment; and they get that way because writers no doubt wanted to avoid charges of self-interest. In the poem with which I began, from Wallace Stevens, the narrator asks:

‘Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man

Close to me, hidden in me day and night?’

To which our mythographers would no doubt answer--yes; do so; provided it is someone *else’s* volume.