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Gnomes in Poems: Wisdom Performance on the Athenian Stage

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An ethnography-of speaking-approach to proverb-use lets us explore the deployment of this genre as part of personal self-projection and of social life. Greek drama, by presenting proverbs in the mouths of its staged characters, makes use of the ordinary performance value of this “genre of speaking” while constructing a broader theatrical event. Characters can be judged on the basis of their skill at proverb-use, and important junctures in the plays can be marked by the employment of *gnômai*. Resistance to proverbs, and misuse of the genre (whether or not intentional) further mark speakers. This paper will appear in the *Festschrift for John Papademetriou*.

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Why is it one rarely hears such paragraphs as the following?

“Since I have met Professor Papademetriou there has been a lot of water under the bridge. The invitation to submit an article for this Festschrift was an offer I couldn't refuse and even if I did, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good. Although writing for John's eyes an article about the intersection of folklore and Greek literature may be like carrying coals to Newcastle (or owls to Athens), it's all in a day's work. The sun may already be over the yardarm, it's better late than never and I might as well start fresh to kill two birds with one stone because well begun is half done and here today gone tomorrow, though when I am out of sight and out of mind I hope you don't think I am merely, as the computerized translating program once said, so wrongly and yet so well, invisible and insane.”¹

It is not because it is riddled with clichés. Clichés, those aging professors of the verbal world, which Northrop Frye and others in *The Harper Handbook to Literature* write off as “overused expressions once clever or metaphorical, but now trite and timeworn”-- *clichés* we could simply dismiss.² But what is wrong with my opening exercise paragraph goes deeper than cliché. It has to do with the argument, in this paper, that the

¹ I am indeed honored in having been acquainted with John Papademetriou for some twenty years now, since his first visit to Princeton, where I was then a young assistant professor who had never set foot in Greece. His work on Greek folk traditions and literature has been a constant inspiration.

² Frye (1985) s.v.

interpretation of even such innovatory literary forms as Greek tragedy and historiography demands an appreciation of the power and poetics of proverbs in traditional culture. To re-imagine an audience for 5th- century Greek literature requires not only that one recognize the occurrence, in great numbers, of proverbial expressions in these texts. It also requires that we appreciate the dynamics underlying proverb use as a key genre, first and foremost, of everyday social life.

If my small initial verbal experiment shows anything, it is that this project of reconstruction is not beyond us, because our speaking culture still retains at least a glimmer of the power of proverbs. “It's an ill wind that blows no one good” strikes us as one, being “a short pithy saying frequently embodying the folk wisdom of a group of nation” to go back to the *Harper Handbook* for a tentative definition.³ Whereas one can make sense, if not elegant prose, by stringing along clichés in speech or writing, this cannot be the case with proverbs, and we recognize that it cannot, because the proverb, *unlike* the cliché, is an assertion about the way in which the world works.

Let me develop the distinction a bit. “Brown as a berry,” “high, wide, and handsome,” “ tender mercies,” “leaving no stone unturned”-- these cliches and thousands more survive because they have a descriptive flavor, a rhythmic appropriateness, and an attractive sound-shape. The last two aspects are linguistic variables which underlie all higher-level poetics. As Roman Jakobson once pointed out, such variables can make even the political slogan a miniature work of art. Take the saying “I like Ike ” (Jakobson’s example). The campaign slogan provides a perfect image of the affectionate, embracing message that it conveys (Eisenhower’s nickname placed inside the verb that echoes his

³ Frye (1985) s.v.

name). We could call it ikonic.⁴ Proverbs also tend to take optimal poetic shapes, using the resources of rhyme, assonance, and rhythm. Consider for instance “a stitch in time saves nine” or “better late than never” with their strikingly balanced phonological segments. ⁵But proverbs have even more semantic power. Saying someone is “brown as a berry” may be an apt if clichéd way of describing his tan. Yet its main purpose is *not* to make an assertion about action in the world. “A stitch in time saves nine,” on the other hand, does imply that one should take that stitch unless one is a fool and has plenty of sewing time on one’s hands.

In rather rough-hewn speech-act terms: clichés have the locutionary form of reduced statements ; they are phrasal rather than sentential; and they have the illocutionary force of constatives, pegging down the facts or freezing actions.⁶ Berries *are* brown ; various things *do* hide under stones and get revealed by turning over what is on top. Proverbs, however, though they have the *locutionary* form of statements, have the *illocutionary* force of directives. They expect or demand action. This is the real reason why a discourse like the first paragraph of this paper is ill-formed when it consists mostly of proverbs. While they do have a function within discourses, as we shall see shortly, to construct a discourse entirely of proverbs is as wrong as making one completely composed of phatic utterances such as “are you with me, okay, got that, ya see, don’t you know, alright.” The latter gives us no semantic content, while the former overloads the communication circuit with directive messages, seeming to have some semantic content,

⁴ Jakobson (1960), without the pun.

⁵ On the sound-shape of proverbial expressions, see Arora (1991) and Russo (1983)

but in reality denuded of application and situational context. Proverbs are meant to direct a listener *within* a situation; their “wisdom” resides in this. Outside of a social context, they fail to work.

Since the socially contextualized grounding of proverbs has only been investigated seriously within the past few decades, the results of ethnographically-informed folklore studies have not, so far as I know, been applied widely to classical texts.⁷ After extracting some guiding principles and results from the contemporary ethnographic studies, I would like to see what happens when we approach Greek proverbs, get a sense of their social use, and apply this knowledge to the interpretation of some dramatic and historical texts from the 5th century. There is much work to do still and this is only a sampling.

Forty years ago, the folklorist Alan Dundes, in an article written with E. O. Arewa, investigated “Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore.”⁸ The title made a bow towards Dell Hymes' formulation of a holistic sociolinguistics, one that would include verbal art among its data. Dundes' introductory observations stemmed from what might have been his experiences as a young parent, for he noticed first that proverbs have a universal social function: they are a device for externalizing and distancing authority: “They say,” or “the elders say” are phrases, notes Dundes,

⁶ For an introduction to such concepts, see Austin (1962), and for an application to Greek poetics, with further bibliography, Martin (1989).

⁷ The work of Lardinois (1997, 2003) stands out as a major contribution for early Greek poetry and for drama. Important for later drama is Tzifopoulos (1995); for Herodotus see Shapiro (2000).

⁸ Dundes and Arewa (1964).

especially useful in generational encounters, in particular for parents who want to project the responsibility for scoldings onto the anonymous past. “The parent” says Dundes “is but the instrument through which the proverb speaks to the audience.”⁹ An extension of this social function is the well-documented use of proverbs in some African societies within the judicial process to argue for precedents.¹⁰ The one who wins is one who can best apply proverbs to the situation at hand. It is not knowledge of the most proverbs, but a sense of their proper use that distinguishes the wise person and the successful litigant. Dundes cites the case of an Ibo youth, studying at Berkeley, who was cut off from the situational contexts and said that he knew all the proverbs but not how to apply them.¹¹

Dundes and Arewa’s analysis of Yoruba proverbs was a breakthrough at the time because it specified the contextual variables one should look for that make proverb use appropriate or not--their “felicity conditions,” if one prefers speech-act terminology. The next generation took up the challenge, so that today there are excellent studies of use in context.¹² I shall focus on one in particular, Charles Briggs's 1988 book, *Competence in Performance*, because it provides a bridge to the study of classical texts.¹³ Briggs works with notions of performance. If one believes that Homeric epic preserves stylized performances of social speech genres (as argued in the *Language of Heroes*), there may

⁹ *Ibid.* p.70.

¹⁰ See Messenger (1959).

¹¹ Dundes and Arewa (1964) 70.

¹² See, for example, Seitel (1977), Sherzer (1983), and Penfield (1983).

¹³ Briggs (1988); see also Briggs (1985) for more detailed study.

be something further to be learned from studying the proverb, not just in context, but as a miniature performance on its own.¹⁴

Briggs pays attention to eight features of this sort of discourse in social use, which will be worth reviewing and then applying to analysis of Greek texts later¹⁵:

1) the performances which Briggs witnessed contain “tying” phrases (in which the speaker links the proverb to conversation (“That's why I tell you this”) or to an earlier proverb citation (“the elders had another saying”).

2) the identity of a proverb owner, if not the speaker, is cited and the relationship of speaker to owner made clear (e.g. “my father used to say”).

3) a small set of speech-act verbs is regularly used to frame the quote.

4) a given proverb text, or that which is usually collected by outsiders as *the* proverb (e.g. “horse-beans are cooked in every home”) does not always assume a fixed form and is not just said once (as Briggs illustrates with the variation: “horse beans are cooked everywhere”). The basic proverb “text” can be elaborated, repeated, expanded. Poetic features--assonance and repetition of segments --are common, but Briggs’s consultants regularly accepted as valid examples of the genre texts that were *not* marked with these formal characteristics. The only formal constraint is on length ---i.e. that no proverb texts exist (in the culture Briggs studied) of more than about 40 syllables.

5) Special associations of the proverb are noted: if it comes from one village, one group of people---but this information can remain implicit if the performer believes a group already knows the provenance of the text..

¹⁴ Martin (1989).

¹⁵ On the categories, see Briggs (1988) 105-24.

6) The general meaning of the proverb is foregrounded for the audience, especially for younger addressees. As is well known, same text can be applied so as to “mean” quite different things--in the case of the horse-beans proverb both “if you try hard enough you can accomplish anything” and “everyone has his faults and we should look for our own first.”

7) The relevance to the present situation is pointed out. Elaboration varies depending on whether the proverb is spoken by “professional” proverb performers (like elders) or non-specialists (children and ethnographers).¹⁶

8) It is formally and functionally essential that the proverb be somehow validated by those to whom it is addressed. Usually a phrase at the end of performance cues the expected response (“See?” “It's true, no?”).

In sum, the completed performance of a proverb is like a logical proof of the performer's position. If the hearer accepts the premise that this *is* indeed a piece of old wisdom from respected elders, that the performer has the right to say it, and that the performer's point really is represented by the proverb, it follows that the hearer *should do* what the speaker wants done.

Perhaps most significant is Briggs' finding that his informants could not identify a proverb text as being a proverb once it was stripped of its normal contextual features: they identified it as mere words. Consequently, Briggs argues that we should work with a model of proverb performance in which all the features he lists are taken into account.

¹⁶ This may vary by culture and period. Jakobson (1966) 638 notes that in his youth “children strenuously practiced the Russian art of interspersing the discourse with proverbial saws and thus learned to alternate and coordinate their individual experience with established maxims.”

Even if some can be optionally deleted, the very fact of their deletion says something about the particular performance. As he puts it: “If a feature is not overtly marked, the information it conveys does not simply disappear but forms part of the background knowledge that is shared by the participants.”¹⁷ I shall return to this phenomenon when I discuss some Greek tragedies.

In concluding his chapter on proverb performance, Briggs cites with approval the formulation of the Czech literary theorist Jan Mukarovsky who drew attention to the “dialogization” of texts in which proverbs, these voices from outside the present space and time, have intervened. The use of a proverb, said Mukarovsky, means the “theatricalization of an utterance.”¹⁸

With this formulation in mind, along with Briggs' ethnographic findings, we might turn first to actual theatrical texts, from Athens in the 5th century BC. In the terms that I have just outlined, we can say that what we are studying within these plays are *performances within performances*. I will focus on three such theatricalizations within Greek tragedy, and then conclude with a look at a non-dramatic text, the historical writing of Thucydides. But first we must attempt to face the following question: how can one be sure what a “proverb” was to the ordinary ancient Athenian outside the highly stylized art form called tragedy? If we could question the audience in the Theater of Dionysos would they respond to our notions of proverb texts the way that Briggs' informants sometimes responded---saying that what we call a proverb is “just words”?

¹⁷ Briggs (1988).

¹⁸ Mukarovsky *apud* Briggs (1988) 132-35.

Fortunately, we have, if not man-in-the- agora interviews, at least one practical source of information that is closer to the 5th century BC than we are, in the person of the father of paroemiology, Aristotle. We are told that he wrote a book on proverbs, or *paroimiai*, to use one favored Greek term for them.¹⁹ The term *paroimia* is a compound meaning literally “beside the road.” It could be that it takes its meaning from an already old metaphor for poetry, as the *oimê* or “course” of song, so that *paroimiai* are sayings aside from the “text”. But I would like to propose another possible course of semantic development. There is a rare word, attested only in a late lexicographer, but a perfectly good Greek formation *paroimos*--meaning “one who lives by the road” i.e., a neighbor.²⁰ I wonder in fact whether *paroimiai* were originally “neighbor sayings”---keeping in mind that the sayings themselves, according to Briggs, are often keyed by speakers to their earlier provenance. This is the type of language event which would occur in conversation with the people whom you meet when you are walking down your street-- your *paroimoi*.²¹ Whatever the etymology, when we return to Aristotle, within the *Rhetoric* it appears that he uses this word *paroimia* as an unmarked term for proverbs. It covers what we might call catch-phrases or sayings: for instance the phrase “Carpathian hares” which can be uttered when a situation is getting out of control. The story, we are

¹⁹ On ancient research into proverbs, especially among the Peripatetics, see Kindstrand (1978).

²⁰ Hesych.(p 965) καὶ παροίμων ἰγεῖτν.

²¹ It is interesting that Aristotle even knows a *paroimia* on the topic of neighbors: “*Attikos paroikos*” or “Attic neighbor”(*Rhet.* 2.21.13)—apparently, not a complimentary description.

told, behind this phrase is that hares were once released on the island of Carpathos, which was subsequently overrun by the animals.

Aristotle also employs a marked term *gnômê*, which he defines in Book 2 of the *Rhetoric* as “ A showing forth (*apophansis*) not of particular things such as what sort of a man a certain Iphicrates is--but in general; and not about everything---such as straight is opposite to curved--but about all that has to do with actions (*peri hosôn hai praxeis eisi*) and what is to be chosen or avoided with regard to action.”²²

These *gnômai* are for Aristotle like the end-points of syllogisms. Take the following gnome: “Whatever man is of sound mind should never teach his children to be overwise;” then add an explanatory sentence: “For apart from laziness, they gain evil envy from their fellow citizens;” and you get a rhetorical enthymeme (*Rhet.2.21.2*). The full forms are what interested Aristotle as segments to be used in constructing rhetorical arguments. Though he qualifies as the father of folklore study, he is nevertheless a formalist and hardly ever tells us about who used what proverbs when or why. He does however say that the use of maxims (*gnômologeîn*) is suitable for those advanced in years; doing so before that age is unseemly, as is storytelling (*muthologeîn*). “To speak of things about which one has no experience” Aristotle writes “is stupid and uneducated” (*Rhet. 2. 21.9*). A sufficient proof, Aristotle goes on to say, is that country folk are fond of making up or using proverbs (they are *gnômotupoi*) and are ready always to make a display of them (2.21.9). The verb “make a display” (*apophainontai*) gives us the noun *apophansis*, however, which as we have seen Aristotle himself uses to define the gnome. So it appears that Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* actually preserves an older idea of proverbs as

²² Aristot. *Rhet.* . 2.21.2.

something that one performs--at least his diction shows traces of this, even if he tends to think that this kind of “showing off” is for the rustic set.

What happens when we view the interactions on the Athenian stage as if tragedy were presenting us with a sample, albeit stylized, of the way that citizens actually used language, or “showed it off” in social context? Perhaps this seems to impose modern sociolinguistic categories on ancient art-form. But we are still using native categories, I would argue. After all, Aristotle himself turns immediately for his sample *gnômai* to tragedies. If *he* can read ancient plays as social rhetoric, so can we.

A full-scale study, which still awaits an author, would elicit from extant Greek tragedy a list of pragmatic features concerning proverbs---for example, whether males and females use them equally often; what audience they are directed at; at what points in the action they seem to occur, and so forth.²³ With such a list, one could then analyze variations from the norm and explore their meanings.

We might begin where Aristotle left off. In his gnomic examples he uses lines from Euripides’ *Medea*, the passage where Jason has already informed his wife of his new alliance with the daughter of Creon,. As the new father-in-law comes to order Medea out of Corinth we feel the full authority of his position. He does not perform a gnome. He does, however, call Medea *sophê* “clever” or “wise” It is to this that she replies (lines 292-93): “This is not the first time, Creon; often my reputation (*doxa*) has harmed me and done great evils.” The proverbial expression now comes into play as a transition from her recollection of previous experiences. “No sound-minded man should ever have his

children well taught to be overly clever” (*perissôs ekdidaskesthai sophous*, 295). Then, the reason is given: this much we are familiar with from Aristotle. But the full elaboration of Medea’s gnomic utterance continues, with far richer messages. There is a second explanatory sentence (lines 298-99): “If you put new, smart things (*kaina...sopha*) before the eyes of fools, you’ll appear useless and not wise (*ou sophos*).” She goes on to say that she herself must endure this fate, “for being wise, to some, I am an object of jealousy, to others I am irksome. But I am not so very wise” (*sophê*, 305). Is Medea speaking about herself? If so, we might think that she has accepted Creon’s portrayal of her cunning. But her expansion of the gnomic thought is in masculine or unmarked adjectival form (*sophos* at 299). Another reading, therefore, is that instead of talking about herself she is threatening Creon. *He* is the one who is being too clever for his own good by allowing this marriage of Jason’s. Medea, in performing this proverb, has set a rhetorical trap: the first gnome, on child-rearing, is sufficiently distanced, by the third-person expression, allowing her to then use a second-person statement under protective cover as it were, since the first statement characterizes the discourse as being about some other party.²⁴ If Creon takes her first statement at face value, he then assumes that the second ---that “you will be useless and not wise” [note *sophos* masculine]--is just a more vivid expression, using the second-person (just as in English proverbs like “You get what you pay for”). Ironically, Medea may only be using the cover of a proverb while she is actually referring directly to Creon in the second- person. The comparative materials, however, such as

²³ Russo (1997) provides an excellent framework for distinguishing and analyzing *paroimiai*, *gnômai*, and related genres, but without application to their use within other literary genres.

Seitel's work among the Haya of Tanzania --suggest that second-person proverbs are more charged and rare: one eases into them only in the course of speaking.²⁵ Might we expect a younger, female foreigner to address a second- person proverb to a Greek tyrant? Precisely in such moments of discourse drama is produced: will she or won't she go too far linguistically? There is further irony here. If Medea is performing with proverbs as proficiently as I am suggesting, the audience for this play has to view here as an *expert* in Greek discourse, which then runs counter to her self-presentation as the abused and helpless foreigner. When she says "I too have a share in this chance situation" (*tukhês*, 302) it is as if she asserts that she and Creon suffer the same condition, a bold rhetorical strategy aimed at bringing him to her level. Given this cunning use of rhetoric, her conclusion "I am not too *sophê*" (305) is thus even more shadowed with irony.

In terms of her proverb performance, Medea seems to follow a common pattern, letting the proverb take the sting out of a loss of face. In addition, she fits the type of a virtuoso wisdom performer. As we find these persons described in the ethnographies, the best regularly make disclaimers about their own skill. Finally, Medea is so adept that at line 312 she can deal Creon a final blow and have him not even wince. Like the proverbially smooth-talking Irishman who can tell you to go to hell in such a way that you look forward to the trip, Medea says to Creon (line 312), "I do not get jealous (*ou phthonô*) at your success"--a sweet sentiment until we recall that a dozen lines earlier she defined the exceedingly *sophos* man precisely as one who earns *phthonos* from the

²⁴ For this strategy in archaic hexameter poems, see Lardinois (1997).

²⁵ See Seitel (1977).

citizens (300-03). So she can be interpreted as really saying quite insultingly here: I have no *phthonos* toward you, i.e. you must not be clever enough to merit it.

If an awareness of proverbs as a performance medium sharpens the ear in reading Medea, it might still be argued that a standard New Critical approach to detecting irony would have yielded the same results. I do not think this is possible in my next example, from the *Trachiniae*. Here it will be argued that that considering proverb performance as an identifiable phenomenon in natural discourse, one that is re-used poetically, can enable us to see things which simpler reading misses.

The proverb comes in the play's first words (lines 1-5):²⁶

A saying there is men have seen from long back:

You cannot learn a mortal's life until one dies--

Good, bad, whatever it turn out. But I,

I know mine, even before the brink of Hades:

I have a grievous and unlucky lot--

Deianeira is lamenting: she fears for her husband, who is long gone on yet another mission. Several things catch the eye right off. Deianeira does not use a gnome that has appeared from long ago (*logos...arkhaios...phaneis*) as a proof, but rather obviously denies it, making a *men...de* contrast (line 1 vs. 4). Second, Aristotle, at least, says *gnomai* are for older people; what is this apparently young woman doing performing one and then finding it faulty? Is she aged beyond her years? Third, there is no tie-in phrase (recall the Briggs typology); the gnome instead starts the entire play. Finally, and perhaps most disturbing for an Athenian audience, is the actual proverb cited, the *logos arkhaios*.

²⁶ This and other translations, unless marked otherwise, are mine.

Could an audience fail to associate this with the story of Solon and Croesus, known to us—and perhaps to them—from Herodotus (1.32)?²⁷ Provenance, as Briggs shows, is used to make proverbs more effective. Deianeira cannot, of course, “cite” Solon, but the dramatic impact is *as if she has* done so. Her performance characterizes her as naive--she cannot possibly have had the experience to speak knowingly yet about her own happiness. Things can and will get a lot worse. The gullibility she will later exhibit in taking at face value the Centaur’s “gift” of a love potion is displayed perfectly in this initial proverb performance—in terms of speaker’s fitness, its applicability to situation, and details of form, the deployment is far from felicitous.

It might seem to some that Deianeira’s quotation of the “old saying” at the opening of the play is rather an antiproverb performance, as she works against the wisdom of unnamed elders. In the ethnographies I have studied thus far, this possibility does not appear. Yet, I would stress that the *frame* of a performance is still preserved; Deianeira’s words encourage an audience to find a point to her proverb-resistance, just as we would expect an application and statement of relevance had she accepted the proverb’s meaning. But this point never comes. The proverb frame remains open ended and the expected conclusion merges into the action of the drama. In other words, we are not allowed to judge the statement that Deianeira makes (that she herself can judge her life even before death) until the play ends and Sophocles has validated the Solonian proverb in the sight of all.

²⁷ Even if the play (undated) was composed before the composition of the *Histories*, it is entirely possible that the Solon story had been long in oral circulation.

To look at Medea, Deianeira or others in terms of their performance of proverbs assumes a kind of characterization by style. The comparative evidence reassures us that we are looking at an important indicator of social personality when we examine such fictive rhetorical competence. My next tragic example provides a kind of confirmation, in that it matches rhetorical *incompetence* to *asocial* behavior. Ajax, who no longer fits socially, in Sophocles' dramatic representation also fails to perform well in proverbs.

The famous *Trugrede* just before his suicide comprises a striking rhetorical display. It contains two proverbial expressions. He starts off "Long, unnumbered time brings forth all the unclear and hides what has appeared" --and then in proper fashion, applies the saying to his own situation (see 650 *k'ago gar*). He does not credit any elder with this notion that time reverses all, and so we may wonder where he got it. As it turns out, it comes from his own observation of the natural world, but this we do not learn until line 670, after he has said that he too must yield. This may seem like a flaw, his letting the explanation of the proverb's relevance wait so long in the speech, but as Briggs' examples show repetitions, disjunctions, doubling back are natural in the real-life proverb performances. And some mental confusion is dramatically appropriate for Ajax at this point. Logically, the later remark--that night gives way to day and winter to spring--does not justify the earlier conclusion--that all is eventually dissolved (lines 648-49). Ajax confuses cyclicity with entropy. But at any rate, theory never does make good rhetoric. What *does* is the life-experience story, and Ajax has one of these, too, as it so happens, which brings us to his second proverb. His sword, "most hateful weapon," was given to him in an exchange with Hector. Ambiguously, he says he will hide it where no one will see (concealing the fact that it will be in his body). Ever since he received this gift, says

Ajax, he got nothing good from the Greeks, “but the proverb of mortals is true: enemies’ gifts are no gifts and not beneficial” (*All’ est’ alêthês hê brotôn paroimia: ekhthrôn adôra dôra kouk onêsima*, 664). In the Greek it is a well-formed, nicely assonantal punch line. Like a good proverb, it explains something; it is used as a proof and given a provenance, albeit a rather vague one (“of mortals”). Yet the explanation is a bit strange: one would expect that the saying “an enemy’s gifts are no gifts” would be performed most effectively by an elder when a younger person is on the point of taking such gifts, or may have just gotten them. Said by the recipient himself, long after the fatal gift is in hand and about to kill him, the proverb is either comic or pathetic. Ajax is an Epimetheus figure who realizes too late the valence of his gift.²⁸ In other words, Sophocles stages in this speech a spectacularly *bad* proverb performance, as yet another way of depicting a hero out of joint. If tragedy has any didactic purpose, we could say that the drama of Ajax’s death is what warns us how to enact such proverbs properly.

If one wanted to continue in this vein, the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus and the *Suppliant Women* of Euripides offer particularly rich and complex patterns of proverb-performance.²⁹ Indeed, most tragic dramas have at least one such moment. But the three examples given already are sufficient to show where I have been heading with the application of ethnographic insights. Anthropology does not give us a brand new method—after all thick description is, as even Clifford Geertz himself recognizes, a species of

²⁸ The mythic motif of the deceptive gift, as old as Hesiod, underlies this scene, as it did the story of the *Trachiniae*: see Nagy (1981).

²⁹ I intend to explicate these in another paper.

philology.³⁰ What it *does* give us is the right to say that people in small-scale, orally communicating societies pay attention to such things as proverb performance and so we, looking at ancient Greece, should too. But of course “traditional,” “oral,” and “small-scale,” are not always the best adjectives to describe the dynamic and progressive Athens of the later 5th century. Rather than being a cold culture, Athens is disputatious, innovative, astir with issues, and “hot”.³¹ This is why I want to conclude with a brief look at Thucydides. Does proverb performance enable us to understand this very different, very modern text about times as unsettled as our own?

The answer, in short, is yes: because the phenomenon almost *is not* there. Just like the element of the *mythic* that he rigorously opposes, proverb performance, another salient feature of Herodotean narrative, seems to get erased by the more analytic historian. The word *paroimia* never occurs; and *gnomê*, as Lowell Edmunds has demonstrated, has a much broader semantic field in Thucydides than the earlier meaning of “articulated opinion” or *sententia*.³² Thucydides does, at least once, take time to recount how a proverb performance may have affected the course of events: at the battle between the Athenian-Argive coalition and the Spartans in Mantinea, an elderly Argive, watching the Spartan advance, shouted out to Agis that he was “trying to cure one evil with another, meaning that his present untimely zeal was intended as redemption for his censured withdrawal from Argos” (*Thuc.* 5.65.2, Stephen Lattimore translation.) Thucydides first of all interprets and rephrases the proverb in sophisticated style,

³⁰ Geertz (1973).

³¹ For an application of these notions (from Lévi-Strauss) to one topic (Athenian musical innovation) that brings out this distinction, see Martin (2003).

contextualizing its application. The impression is that his audience does not speak this simpler language of the elders. We can imagine Herodotus, by contrast, using the proverb *kakon kakôî iasthai* straight out as, a narrator's comment on Agis' role in the action. Second, Thucydides is unwilling to give credit to the proverb performance alone for the subsequent turn of events, when Agis makes a strategic temporary retreat; either it was the shout, he says, or possibly something else occurred to his mind (5.65.3). The result seems to be a determinedly *non-dramatic* account.

But if we moderns fail to hear overt proverbs in Thucydides' prose, older critics more in touch with Greek culture felt differently. The scholiasts note more than a few times that his expressions recall proverbs.³³ I am reminded of Charles Briggs' finding that a set format is not a requirement for proverbial usage. And so, at 2.8.1, when he describes the mutual eagerness for war, Thucydides follows up one general statement ("at the beginning everyone is keener for taking up a cause") with a specific comment on the young persons of both cities, adding almost parenthetically that they fastened onto the conflict "not unwillingly, due to inexperience of war" (*ouk akousiôs hupo apeirias tou polemou*). The scholiast compares the proverb "war is sweet to the inexperienced" (*glukus apeirôi polemos*).³⁴ Most significant here is the gap between the simple form and the transmuted, Thucydidean style. Proverbs have become absorbed into the bloodstream of his prose, and are detectable now only as a steady rhythm of seemingly original observations on human nature.

³² Edmunds (1975).

³³ The scholiast at Thuc.5.65 notes that this *paroimia* was uttered by Orestes, who murdered his mother to avenge his father's death.

If proverbs *per se* do not form part of the argument structure of Thucydides' narrative, we might nevertheless expect them to feature in the reported speeches of others. Remarkably, here too they are almost completely absent (at least that is my impression from an initial review). Probably there is more going on involved here, involving the shading of the historian into his characters. Not only do Thucydides' speakers resemble him in their argumentative power and expression. We can read a few of these speakers as closer to him than the others specifically in this re-modeling, and refining nearly out of existence, of proverbs. The most striking example occurs in the contrasting speeches of the Mytilene debate in Book 3. Kleon's approach, as first speaker, is to denigrate all rhetoric as a kind of debased sophistic entertainment and to excoriate the assembly for even listening. We might expect such a speech to rely on homey wisdom, but there are no gnomic expressions in Kleon's harangue. On the other hand, Diodotus, his opponent, who begins by asserting the very value of articulate political debate, introduces several proverb-like lines into the most dramatic part of his address. He says "poverty produces daring by necessity" (3.45.40) and "hope and desire accompanying everything" (3.45.5). It is not accidental that the former nearly repeats a gnomic line from Sappho (31.17) and the latter could fit Hesiodic descriptions of the power of desire (in fact it forms something very similar to the first part of a hexameter : *hê t'elpis kai [ho] erôs epi panti*). The speaker makes the necessary application of the proverb not to himself but to the *polis* of Athens; the argumentative force of the proverb performance is still clear. Overall, the meditative stance and tone arising from such expressions comes closest to Thucydides' own mode of analyzing and describing events. One can only

³⁴ Scholium ad *Thuc.*2.8, citing a line of Pindar (fr. 110 SM); cf. *CPG*, Diogenianus, s.v.

speculate that it represents the last relic of an older form of eloquence, a form that the new science of logical argumentation would denigrate and end up undercutting in the last decades of the century.³⁵

Thus, the original ethnographic urge, to track proverbs in performance, inevitably leads one in the case of ancient Greece to such matters as the development of philosophy, the invention of rhetoric, the mechanisms of comic abuse, and the presentation of self as practiced by heroes, tyrants and demagogues. But this is not the place to undertake that extended account: if there is one thing wisdom literature teaches, it is that a word to the wise is sufficient.³⁶

³⁵ For the development of a formal art of rhetoric alongside pre-rhetorical forms such as Homeric speech and Pindaric praise, see Cole (1991).

³⁶ This paper has benefited from comments made in response to oral versions at Princeton, UCLA, Ohio State, and Indiana University (Bloomington). I thank audiences at those institutions, and especially Matthew Christ, William Hansen, Robert Kaster, Kathryn Morgan, Joseph Nagy, and Christian Wildberg, for advice.

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