

KRISTA RODKEY  
(INDIANA UNIVERSITY, BLOOMINGTON)

## HERODOTEAN ORACLES: MORAL AND RATIONAL RESPONSES TO AMBIGUITY

*The oracles that appear in Herodotus's Histories are usually ambiguous, yet despite this ambiguity it is clear from his narratives that Herodotus holds oracle-recipients morally responsible for their oracular interpretations, whether correct or incorrect. Though these two commitments seem to be in tension, I challenge the traditional view that Herodotus' responsibility standard is too high given the ambiguity of the oracles.*

*Instead of examining the ambiguity of the oracular texts in isolation, I argue the texts must be considered in an interpretive situation involving four sources of uncertainty: the genuineness of the oracle, the disposition of the god consulted, the oracular text itself, and the appropriate response to it. Facing these ambiguities, I argue, Herodotus's characters can take one of two coherent attitudes toward the oracle decision-making process: the attitude of the powerful and controlling who hope to overcome the uncertainty surrounding oracles by making use of their cleverness and power, or the attitude of the pious who hope to understand the oracles from within a framework of piety, good sense, and community integrity.*

**Key words:** Herodotus; oracles; riddles; fate; character; humility; hubris

### The Pattern of Herodotus' Oracles

*[I]f Croesus were to wage war against the Persians, he would destroy a great empire* – this is the oracle joyfully received by Croesus in one of the most memorable sequences in Herodotus's *Histories* (1.53). The ambiguous oracular statement, Croesus' optimistic assumption that the Persian empire will be the one destroyed, the defeat that shows him to be mistaken, and the god's declaration that "he should have sent again" to Delphi for a clearer answer seem paradigmatic of the Herodotean oracle<sup>1</sup> story: the

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'oracle' to cover any oracle, dream, vision, portent, or prophecy. They

oracle given is ambiguous, it is misinterpreted, and the one who misinterpreted it is judged to be the one at fault (1.53, 1.91).

This pattern can be seen again in Croesus' interpretation of the oracle that he need not fear for his reign "until a mule became king of the Medes" (1.55). Croesus takes the claim to be a description of an impossible event and thus a message that he need never fear for his reign (1.56), but after Croesus' defeat the oracle at Delphi explains that Cyrus, with his mixed Medeo-Persian heritage, was the 'mule' of the prophecy. In both these cases the oracle explicitly blames Croesus for his interpretation, declaring that these oracles were "not considered wisely" and were "misconstrued;" eventually even Croesus is willing to acknowledge that "it was he himself, and not the god, who was in the wrong" (1.91).

Croesus is not the only one to suffer from the ambiguity of oracles. Consider the Spartans plan to attack Tegea; the oracle responds to their inquiries with the claim that "Tegea I will give you" as "a dance floor to tread, a beautiful plain to measure out with a line" (1.66). The Spartans interpret this as a positive sign and they go to battle bringing shackles in their confidence that they will be chaining up prisoners of war. Instead, they lose and, chained in their own shackles, they are "made to work the plain of Tegea, measuring it out with a line" (1.66). In this story no divine speech tells us that they are at fault for their interpretation, but Herodotus' narration suggests the Spartans are to be blamed. He emphasizes their greed and confidence, their over-estimation of their strength, and their failure to notice the ambiguity of the oracle (1.66).

Here again we have the pattern: the oracle is ambiguous, misinterpreted, and the fault lies with the interpreter. Sometimes the pattern varies, and the person or persons who receive the oracle come to grief through failing to find any interpretation of the oracle. The Siphnians do not form any alternative theory about the "wooden ambush and a herald in red," but they fail to recognize the red ships as fulfilling the prophecy (3.57–58). Polykrates, to his ruin, ignores the oracle and his daughter's foreboding crucifixion dreams altogether (3.124). Arkesilaos combines a mix of misinterpretation and forgetfulness when he burns his enemies in a tower, thus "firing the pots" he was told to leave alone; he then tries to avoid the city of Cyrene, mistakenly believing it matched the description of the place where it was foretold he would die (4.164).

---

are all messages from the gods, they are ambiguous, they have the same content, and they structure the narrative in the same way. Fontenrose (1978: p. 146) also classes dreams with oracles.

Herodotus does not always explicitly assign blame to the failed interpreters in the text, but Nanno Marinatos (1981, p. 138) considers it a Herodotean assumption:

“Herodotus’ history abounds in examples that show that responsibility for correct interpretation lay with the person who received the prophecy....There are numerous other examples from fifth-century Greek literature which testify that when there was a misinterpretation of prophecy, the blame was attached to the person who misunderstood.”

Joseph Fontenrose (1978: p. 62) also claims that for Herodotus a misinterpreted oracle “implies a fault in the recipient”. Even if we allow Herodotus to think oracle interpretation is partially subject to luck, it is clear he thinks in most cases it is a matter of responsibility, not chance.<sup>2</sup>

This seems a heavy burden to set upon oracle recipients, especially when we remember how ambiguous the oracles often are. Fontenrose notes several distinct ambiguous formats. The first category is the ordinary object given an ambiguous description, e.g. a warning against a snake is fulfilled by a man with a snake on his shield (p. 61). Here the oracle recipient usually avoids the object described by a literal reading of the words only to find that their actual doom comes from something that those words describe in a figurative sense. Fontenrose puts Arkesilaos’s oracle in this category: a literal reading of the oracle suggests that he should avoid pottery kilns and peninsulas with bulls, and it is only a figurative reading that allows the oracle to apply to men in towers and persons whose names have bovine associations (p. 61).

But there is a second category of ambiguity, Fontenrose points out, in which the recipient takes the oracle text to be euphemistic rather than a literal or figurative description of actual events. Some seem to impose an impossible condition; the ambiguous part of the oracle sounds like an elaborate expression for *never*, *nowhere*, or *no-one*. Croesus’ prophecy about the mule becoming king of the Medes works in this way. Similar non-Herodotean oracles include the prophecy that Herakles will be “killed by no living man,” and that Amphictions would not have victory until a wave wash against Apollo’s cliff-top temple (pp. 64–5). These prophecies can be fulfilled either by a literal or a figurative fulfillment of their words. Yet a third oracle type employs euphemisms which are misunderstood non-euphemistically, e.g. death or misfortune is described as ‘finding rest’ or ‘change residence’ (pp. 66–8). Often the oracle recipient actively seeks the ‘rest’ or

---

<sup>2</sup> At 1.68 Herodotus says Lichas solves the riddling oracle by “good luck and good sense,” suggesting that Herodotus allows that luck affects at least some cases.

‘escape’ promised only to realize too late what the promise amounts to (pp. 67–8).

Fontenrose takes issue with the Herodotean assumption that the oracle recipient is at fault for misunderstanding the oracle. He refers to oracular ambiguity as ‘misleading’ and ‘deceptive,’ objecting that the prophecies’ solutions are too arbitrary for their recipients to be blamed for failing to understand. He considers Croesus’ mule oracle strained:

“All is fair in folktale prophecy, although we would hardly consider the child of a Persian father and a Median mother to be a hybrid in any sense of the term – two people could hardly be more closely related than the Medes and Persians... In the terms of this story anybody who has parents from different people is a mule” (p. 63).

Similarly, he thinks it is unreasonable to pretend Cambyses was at fault for misunderstanding his dream where a messenger announces that “Smerdis” has taken the throne (3.62–64): “Cambyses could not have possibly have understood Smerdis to mean anybody but his brother” (p. 63). Thus Fontenrose concludes that the gods “do not intend that the oracle receiver shall understand, no matter how wise or prudent he may be” (p. 62).

H. W. Parke, and D. E. W. Wormell (1956: p. ii) offer a cynical take on ambiguous oracles, suggesting that “generalities and vagueness” serve as a convenient method for the oracle givers to hedge their bets, “confusing the issue, and safeguarding themselves” (p. xxvii). Thus the prediction about ‘a great empire being destroyed’ would be deliberately constructed so that it could be fulfilled both by victory and by defeat (p. xxvii). Even a relatively clear oracle like that to the Spartans attacking Tegea can, if “conveyed in pictorial images,” be reinterpreted after the fact even though the imagery was “calculated definitely to mislead” (p. xxvi). On this view, the oracles are ambiguous, and in fact have no correct interpretation, because they are transparently constructed for post hoc analysis.

In fact, fewer oracles contain the particular kind of ambiguity necessary for a satisfying post hoc analysis than Parke and Wormell imply. Croesus’ Persian oracle is a memorable example in that the destruction of either empire would satisfy the prediction equally well, but this is not representative; convincing alternative solutions to the ‘mule’ oracle or the ‘firing of the pots’ are harder to come by. To put it another way, if the oracles hedge their bets, most do so by selecting curiously specific phrases and images, which, though ambiguous, do not seem designed to fit with a wide range of event outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Walsh (2003: p. 59) points out that a favorite Pythian formula was “it is better and more good...”. This would at first seem to offer the kind of consistent and open-ended hedging of the pronouncement that would strike Parke and Wormell as suspiciously

Parke and Wormell's project is motivated by a desire to distinguish authentic oracles (actually pronounced at Delphi) from fictitious oracles (invented by storytellers, pious forgers, or political opportunists). Likewise, Fontenrose's analysis of oracles is aimed at a better understanding of their historicity, though Fontenrose classification scheme tries to take into account on the way riddles feature in folktales and then are incorporated into history (Fontenrose, 1978: p. 80). Pericles Georges (1986: pp. 23–37) also tries to evaluate the historicity of the oracles in 7.140–144, evaluating their priority and provenience, considering the political uses of oracles, and the susceptibility of oracular institutions to corruption.

But as Maurizio (1997) points out, Fontenrose, Georges, Parke and Wormell all attempt to account for the authenticity or non-authenticity of oracles through a positivist lens, analyzing them as human-motivated stories told with specific political purposes in mind. By contrast, Maurizio (1997: p. 330) analyzes them as structured communal stories, which focus on human-divine relationships:

“these scholars still look at oracles as responses to particular events that can be assigned to a particular time and place. But, as we have seen, oracular tales chronicle the eruption of the divine in the human world and are more concerned to establish the presence and miraculous nature of the divine on earth. Two types of history, secular and sacred respectively, are evident in the work of Herodotus, and are fundamentally different in their orientation.”

In Maurizio's view, these sacred interactions serve to highlight the “the gap between human and divine intelligence, and the tragedy of the human condition” and the oracles themselves are “divine utterances which [elude] human comprehension because of their tropic nature” (Maurizio, 1997: pp. 331–2).<sup>4</sup> But though this use of ambiguity may help us understand the structure of the Herodotean narratives, it fails to show how the Herodotean assumption is justified; failure to understand oracles is, on this view, a matter of tragedy more than blame.<sup>5</sup>

---

convenient. Yet, as Walsh points out, the alternatives that this formula suggests were often particular courses of action suggested to the Pythia, so that the formula is not as open-ended as it seems (p. 59). Walsh herself is more interested in connecting this formula to the idea that life is “a balancing act between *tuche*, fate or chance, and *techne*, art and agency” (p. 60).

4 Georges is not exclusively concerned with historicity, but also considers Herodotus's reasons for selecting particular versions of oracles, shaping his narrative to be “theologically more satisfactory” or appropriate to his subject (Georges, 1986: p. 25).

5 Cf. Shapiro (1996: p. 348) who likewise emphasizes the “the jealousy of the gods and the ephemeral nature of human happiness”.

### **Problems for Herodotus**

Does the Herodotean assumption together with the ambiguity of the oracles pose a problem for Herodotus? Perhaps. If Georges, Parke and Wormell are right the intentional vagueness of these oracles could be seen as casting doubt on Herodotus' credibility as a critical historian. If Fontenrose is right, it may cast doubt on his ability as a story-teller by committing the figures in his history to an implausible psychology; no oracle recipient could have rational hope of coming to understand the oracle. If Maurizio is right, though the oracles are useful for structuring his divine-human narratives, any blame directed towards oracle misinterpreters shows a failure to recognize the tragic nature of the human predicament.

But let us set these concerns aside to focus on the ethical-epistemological puzzle presented by Herodotus's assumption: why does Herodotus treat those who have failed at an epistemic task with ethical blame? That is, one might expect that if someone misinterprets an oracle something has gone wrong with their beliefs – they have failed to judge their evidence rationally, for instance. But this is usually a matter for epistemic blame – we think the person has been a bad reasoner, they've done a bad job at critically evaluating their beliefs. We don't tend to think they deserve ethical blame, which we reserve for people's character flaws or immoral actions. Yet Herodotus treats those who misinterpret as morally blameworthy, and it is puzzling.

In short, if Herodotus's interpreters are right that these oracles are hopelessly ambiguous, it is hard to see how any oracle recipient could have rational hope that he would be able to understand the oracle. It is even harder to see how an ordinary person could be rationally responsible for failing to understand them. And it is harder still to see how Herodotus could be justified in blaming those who fail to understand oracles not just with epistemic blame but with moral blame. Is there any way to solve this puzzle? To justify Herodotus in the view that (1) oracles are ambiguous, and yet (2) people can be rationally justified in relying on the oracles in their decision making, and (3) oracle recipients are responsible (morally and epistemically) for their faulty interpretations?

### **The Broader Epistemic and Ethical Situation**

If we want to justify Herodotus' view, we must look at oracle recipients' place in a larger ethical and epistemic context. Fontenrose's classification of oracular ambiguity is limited to the text of the oracle, but the real oracle

recipient finds himself in a complex situation with many potential sources of uncertainty.

First of all, the recipient may be uncertain about the genuineness of the oracle he has received, unsure that the message came from a reliable source. As Georges notes, the “evidence for the manipulation and outright fakery of oracular responses is abundant and irrefutable” (Georges, 1986: p. 36). Donald Lateiner (2007: pp. 810, 813) notes that, given the Greek view that “false oracles” were in existence, “oracles and oraclemongers were not automatically trusted,” nor does Herodotus shy away from recording the “foibles and pratfalls of revered institutions and persons.” Herodotus mentions bribery and corruption in connection with oracles several times (5.62–63, 5.90, 6.66, 6.75, 6.123, 7.6, 8.134.). Even if the oracle was originally from a good source, it is usually possible that it could have been tampered with by the delegates who were sent to fetch it. For instance, the Cymaeans suspect the delegate they sent to the oracle of tampering with the message and send a new delegation the second time (1.158). Similarly, the story of Mys and the oracle delivered in a barbarian tongue (leaving Mys the only witness to it) suggests other ways in which oracles could be contaminated (8.135).

The genuineness of the oracle, however, is not the only source of uncertainty. Even an uncorrupted message could, if the gods are displeased with you, prompt you to go to your own destruction. Consider the Cymaeans who ask the oracle whether or not they should hand over to Cyrus the fugitive who has taken refuge at the temple. The oracle gives them a favorable answer, but the people wonder at it. Eventually, after repeated questioning, the oracle admits that it was giving them this advice so that they would be more quickly ruined as punishment for even considering such an immoral course of action (1.158).

Of course there is the ambiguity inherent in most of the oracular messages themselves. This is true of dreams as well, which use symbolic or partial imagery – the vine spreading from the woman’s womb (1.108), Darius bearing wings (1.209), the hanging man tended by the gods (3.124) – these are all subject to interpretation. Even a straightforward dream representing the delivery of a message can be misinterpreted if assumptions are made about who the message refers to and whether the message is true. Cambyses dreams of the announcement that ‘Smerdis’ has taken the throne, and he assumes this means his brother will usurp him when in fact the message will be true of the man who, under the name of Smerdis impersonates Cambyses’ brother.

Finally, there is uncertainty in deciding what actions will be appropriate or effective responses to the oracle. It would seem indisputable that a thing



fated to happen will happen, yet those who believe something is fated to happen might still think that their actions can affect the time and the manner in which the thing happens. There is also the possibility that the prophecy might represent a contingent prediction or conditional fate, in which case, one could take action to prevent the antecedent of the conditional from being fulfilled. Unfortunately, it is not clear that our actions in any particular case will have the effects we wish; it is the irony of oracles that an action taken to avoid or delay fate may be precisely the action that brings that fate about: by avoiding Cyrene Arkesilaos meets the man who kills him; Astyages' attempt to eliminate Cyrus in infancy provides Cyrus with the motive to kill him (4.164, 1.107–124).

In short, the oracle recipient faces four important sources of uncertainty: the genuineness of the oracle, the disposition of the god consulted, the oracular text itself, and the appropriate response to it.<sup>6</sup> Now consider two coherent attitudes to those sources of uncertainty which offer rival frameworks in which one can rationally expect to understand oracles despite their ambiguity.<sup>7</sup> On the one side, there is the attitude of the powerful and controlling who hope to overcome the uncertainty surrounding oracles by making use of their cleverness and power. On the other, there is the attitude of the pi-

---

<sup>6</sup> These are the places ambiguity *can* arise; whether ambiguity actually *does* arise there must be checked on an individual basis.

<sup>7</sup> I have called these attitudes 'frameworks' because I believe there is a coherence to these attitudes best understood as habits of thought that affect a person's overall conceptualization of their place in the world. In fact, although I have not used the terms of virtue epistemology, I am inclined to think of the two attitudes, in Linda Zagzebski's terms, as intellectual pride and intellectual humility. Zagzebski analyzes epistemic traits as Aristotelian character traits relevant for intellectual flourishing (Zagzebski, and Fairweather, 2004). Intellectual traits like intellectual courage, curiosity, diligence, generosity, and honesty are opposed to intellectual vices like intellectual sloth, cowardice, insensibility, dishonesty, or small-mindedness. Persons develop these virtues and vices over time and have a significant amount of indirect control over them because of the way in which their choices shape their habits of mind. Hence, people are responsible for their intellectual virtues or vices on Zagzebski's view (Zagzebski, and Depaul, 2003). Moreover these habits are not isolated instances of bad behavior, but habitual attitudes that affect multiple areas of a person's life. While it is possible that some areas *could* be less affected by hubristic attitudes, it is no accident if that person's habitual expectation of control in one area influences them to expect control more generally. For these reasons I prefer understanding these attitudes in virtue epistemic terms, but I have tried to present my account using the neutral terms of framework, approach, and attitude. Some readers might prefer to think of the two approaches I have outlined as two paradigmatic character types found in Herodotean narratives, allowing for the other characters to occupy a range of positions in between these two paradigmatic cases.



ous who hope to understand the oracles from within a framework of piety, humility, and good sense.

### The Approach of the Powerful

Let us examine the approach the powerful take to oracles.<sup>8</sup> A survey of Herodotus' stories shows that oracles provide a special stumbling block to political leaders. The famous failures center around kings or other men of power who assume that their power can insulate them from the possibility of misinterpretation. Croesus, Astyages, Cyrus, Polykrates, Cambyses, Arkesilaos, and Xerxes all fall afoul of prophecies. Christopher Pelling (2006: p. 148), in his discussion of Solon's warning to Croesus, suggests that part of Solon's warning included the claim that: "The most prosperous act or think in particular ways, and those ways contribute to their destruction". If this is right, part of this destructive attitude can be seen in the way they assume they possess various kinds of power:

*The power to test oracles.* Pelling notes the "kingly taste for experimentation" with the divine. Croesus' test of the oracles is an obvious example (1.46), though Amasis also sets himself up as a judge of oracular reliability (2.174).<sup>9</sup> Pelling classes Cyrus's actions in this group, since it was partly curiosity about whether the divine would intervene to save Croesus that leads Cyrus to put Croesus on the fire (1.86). Croesus, Cyrus, and Amasis survive their tests unharmed, but there are hints that in making these kinds of tests the kings are out of their depth.<sup>10</sup> Pelling notes that Cambyses' similar test of his fallen rival Psammenitus's spirit "misfires" (3.14–6, Pelling, 2006: p. 156). Likewise, Xerxes's "scientific experiment" does not

<sup>8</sup> Naturally, the politically powerful would be interested in oracles for their ability to raise troop morale, influence policy, and establish the legitimacy of rulers (5.62, 6.66, 7.6, 8.134). But here I am setting aside this part of their interest since it does not require that the oracles be true, and what I wish to see is how the powerful think about their own chances of being helped by an oracle.

<sup>9</sup> Amasis's career in practical joking and petty theft leads him to participate in an involuntary and unofficial test of the oracles: when Amasis denied his thefts, his accusers "bring him before the judgment of an Oracle, whenever there was one in their place; and many times he was convicted by the Oracles and many times he was absolved" (2.174). As king he treats these tests of the oracles as definitive and withholds funding from those temples whose oracles had declared him innocent.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Kindt (2006: p. 38) points out how Croesus, in testing the oracle, attempts to speak the obscure language of the gods, yet fundamentally misunderstands what Apollo says to him in this language.

turn out according to his prediction; although Artabanus is visited by the same dream, the apparition is clearly not fooled by their swapped clothes, as Xerxes had hypothesized (7.15–7).

Nor do the powerful seem worried about offending the oracles through this testing, though Pelling cites non-Herodotean sources that show such testing would be seen as presumptuous (Pelling, 2006: p. 161). Even within Herodotus' writings we find support for the idea that testing is dangerous; when Glaukos tests the oracle by asking it whether he can seize the money a stranger left in trust with him, "the Pythia replied that testing the oracle and committing the crime are one and the same" (6.86). This same theme is repeated in the fugitive story where the god disapproves of the Cymaeans for even asking about an impious course of action (1.158).

*The power to ensure oracle's favor.* Croesus clearly thinks he is entitled to the god's favor because of the gifts he has given (Pelling, 2006: p. 161). It is not clear whether or not Herodotus thought this gift-giving strategy was effective. Harrison (2000: p. 61) argues Herodotus opposes it, and Pelling is sympathetic to that conclusion (Pelling, 2006: p. 161). Certainly persons of power are not outspoken proponents of the idea that a broader vision of piety or a humble attitude are better ways of winning the gods' favor. More often than not, it seems, persons of power forget that the oracle's favor is not guaranteed, leading them to assume it is as faithful as their other servants.

*The power to interpret oracles.* Most kings have a professional staff of oracle interpreters on hand to assist them. This, combined with their self-perceived cleverness, gives them reason to be optimistic about their chances of interpreting the oracles. They do not seem alert to the chances of getting bad advice, as happens to Astyages in 1.120. Here the magi belatedly noticed that the oracle could be fulfilled by Cyrus's play-acted kingship, though earlier they had interpreted the oracle as meaning Cyrus would seize the kingship (1.108). Kings can be the dupes of their own advisors' selective interpreting: Xerxes' allies would praise the king's advisor Onomakritos "whenever he came with them into the King's presence, where he would quote oracles. But if some oracles portended failure for the barbarian, he did not mention them. He recited only those that predicted the most fortunate outcomes." (7.6). Onomakritos is a trouble maker, but it is not hard to imagine that the pressures of court might tempt even the honest to come up with an interpretation to the ruler's liking, a fact the powerful rarely seem to consider (cf. Pelling, 2006: p. 168).

*The power to act in response to oracle.* The powerful are quick to act. Many oracles which do not recommend a specific course of action are regarded by the powerful as legitimizing courses of action they already wish

to take, or justifying new, precautions measures. But the powerful do not think critically about how even their precautionary measures might produce the end they wish to avoid. For instance, Croesus uses his power and influence to try to protect his son, little realizing that the man he commands to watch over him could accidentally kill him (1.34, 1.37–43). Some, like Mardonius and Astyages hope to avoid the fated event altogether (1.108, 9.93–4). It is possible they think they have been given a conditional prophecy, as Dorothy Sayers (1963: p. 220) describes this view of fate: “the seer... has been looking along one of the lines of potentiality. He has seen the future not as it will be but as it might be”. On the other hand, it is possible that Mardonius and Astyages actually think themselves capable of cheating fate. If this is so, they are more deluded about their powers than Croesus, who is at least realistic in his desire to delay rather than avoid his son’s death (1.34).

### **The Approach of the Moral**

The alternative framework is that of the moral – not the extraordinarily moral, but those who have a run-of-the-mill piety and humility. Where the powerful suppose that their superior shrewdness, or wealth will allow them to control the four sources of uncertainty, the moral trust in common sense, community integrity, and their moral code to guide them safely through the four sources of uncertainty. Those who find success with the moral approach – the Athenians who debate the ‘wooden walls’ oracle, Lichas with the forge – typically have community support, stop to think about multiple interpretations, and act with caution. The moral approach does not mirror the approach of the powerful in that the powerful think their approach guarantees success, whereas the moral do not take their method to be certain and are simply putting themselves in the best possible position to be favored by the gods.

*Obtaining a genuine oracle.* The pious stance does not allow the moral to test oracles after the manner of Croesus, but communities with integrity can exclude corruption whenever they find it. For instance, Onomakritos was once expelled for tampering with an oracle and in lesser cases of suspected dishonesty, the oracle could be asked a second time (1.158, 7.6). Temple corruption cannot be prevented by an individual, but its absence is a mark of community integrity.

*Obtaining the oracle’s favor.* The moral hope to obtain the oracle’s favor through their piety. If they are faithful observers of the religious festivals and do as the oracle commands (such as finding the bones to restore to

Delphi (1.67)), it seems reasonable for them to believe that the oracle will be well-disposed towards them. To be sure, they must avoid offending the oracle by asking, like the Cymaeans or Glaukos, for counsel on a course of action they know to be impious (1.158, 6.86). The repeated Athenian delegations who receive the ‘wooden walls’ oracle (7.141) follow the same pattern; the delegates return as ‘suppliants’ with olive branches, perhaps to improve the disposition of the god towards them by a pious display, or because they suspect that to abandon the city, as the oracle seems to recommend, would be an impious abandonment of the temple complex to violence, a view suggested by Maurizio (1997, pp. 316, 331).

*Understanding the oracular text.* If Fontenrose, Parke, and Wormell were right in characterizing the oracles as hopelessly ambiguous, this part of the decision-making task would be insurmountable; however they overstate the unfairness of these oracles. Surely, as Fontenrose himself states, the oracles are often in the style of traditional riddles (Fontenrose, 1978: pp. 81, 83), and riddle-solving conventions are far from arbitrary. An ambiguous phrase like “until a mule become king...” should indicate that the riddle-solving mindset is required, and the fact that Croesus does not consider alternative readings of this phrase tells us less about the difficulty of the riddle and more about Croesus’ conviction that his kingdom was invincible. Fontenrose suggests that the parallel between a mule’s mixed breeding and Cyrus’ heritage is strained, but at least in Herodotus the tension between these two parties is played up so as to emphasize this point. If someone were an avid follower of Medeo-Persian politics, it seems one could conceivably spot the ‘mule’ in question.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, oracle interpretation is not merely the purview of a specialized class. Although professional interpreters play an important role in the oracle interpreting strategies of the powerful, they play a less exclusive role in most ordinary communities which treat interpretation as a community wide project. As Maurizio points out, many oracles circulated orally, were seen to reapply to several situations, and ordinary people were free to try their hand at applying and interpreting them (Maurizio, 1997, p. 328). In fact, Herodotus paints a stark contrast between the Athenians’ open debates over the ‘wooden walls’ oracle, where even the presence of expert interpreters did not preclude debate, and the silence of the Persian troops in response to Mardonius’s enquiries about ominous signs (9.42–43). “Noisy debate” is replaced with “stony silence,” Maurizio notes, as the troops who know of relevant oracles conceal them “[a]fraid to risk Mardonius’ displeasure”

---

<sup>11</sup> Herodotus tells us revenging himself on Cyrus was one of Croesus’s main motivations for the campaign. Given that he has such a personal interest, one might expect him to be familiar with Cyrus’s background (1.73).

and highlighting “the failures of a political system in which only one man’s perspective is allowed to be heard” (Maurizio, 1997: pp. 328ff. cf. 7.6) Perhaps connected to Herodotus’ value for open discussion is the fact that it allows for unexpected contributors, such as Gorgo daughter of Kleomenes who, as the Lacedaemonians puzzled over a mysterious blank wax tablet “deduced the answer for herself”; she “ordered them to scrape off the wax” and found the message written on the wood beneath (7.239). Likewise, the story of Lichas and the forge starts as a collective Spartan project to solve the oracle and recover the bones of Orestes, but Lichas is the one who solves the riddle. (1.68).

*Deciding the appropriate course of action.* The moral approach to finding the right course of action is frequently a matter of community discussion. For instance, the Athenians hold a counsel dedicated to discussing what the protective ‘wooden walls’ were supposed to be and thus how the city ought to prepare for the coming attack (7.142–3). Likewise, the debate about what to do with the fugitive was a community discussion (1.158) as were discussions of the relocation oracles (4.159). Similarly, when Lichas, observing a forge, solved the oracle about finding “a place where two winds blow,” he went back and told it to the Spartans as a group. At that point they collaborated with Lichas to fake his exile so he could reclaim the bones under the forge (1.67–8).

Whether in communal discussions or private deliberation, the moral are typically less quick to act than the powerful, and they resist the idea the oracle might sanction a violation of the moral law. Both the Cymaeans and the Athenians are motivated to question the oracle again rather than act on what they think are the oracle’s impious directions (1.158, 7.142). Sayers points out that Ovid’s story of Deucalion and Pyrrha nicely illustrates this cautious attitude (Sayers, 1963: p. 248). When told by the oracle to throw “the bones of their great mother” behind them Deucalion and Pyrrha are shocked at the suggested sacrilege, but Deucalion decides that “since the oracles are holy and never counsel guilt” the “bones of their great mother” must be the rocks of the earth (*Met.* 1.381–415).

Sayers examines a folktale pattern in which an oracle or prophecy seems to destine a child to be the means of bringing about some disaster, such as causing the death of his father or a king (Sayers, 1963: p. 244–5). Despite the certainty of the disaster, Sayers finds that the folktale logic bears out Deucalion’s rule that the oracles “never counsel guilt.” For if only the subject of the prophecy will wait, for every prophecy about a killing, a takeover, or another morally compromising action, there is a morally benign way of bringing this about. A person might be killed accidentally, Sayers says, referencing Perseus’s accidental killing of his grandfather, or the take

over may be peaceable (Sayers, 1963: p. 247). Likewise we might add that Psammetichos's unpremeditated fulfillment of the oracle allowed him to commit the act of a usurper without guilt (2.151). The moral are committed to waiting to fulfill the prophecy in a morally acceptable manner.<sup>12</sup> Of course just because something is the morally acceptable manner of fulfilling the prophecy does not mean it is easy or pleasant. For at times the moral way to fulfill the prophecy involves accepting the fated thing without resistance, like the Spartans at Thermopylae who embrace their fate, dying with honor on the battlefield (7.219–221).

### Responsibility

Together, these two approaches help resolve the problem of Herodotean rationality and responsibility. Although the decision-making process is subject to multiple sources of uncertainty, the person or community making the decision can take an attitude either of control or humble piety, and it is the value of this approach for which they are responsible, not simply their success or failure in correctly interpreting an oracular message. Although each approach is rationally coherent, Herodotus shows by his choice of examples that the epistemic success of the approaches is coordinated with their moral value. This is why Herodotus can, in most cases, blame both morally and epistemically the person or community who misinterpret the oracle.

If a person misinterpreted an oracle because of some factor that was not clearly related to their approach towards oracular decision-making, Herodotus would likely allow for some plain old bad luck just as he allows for good luck in the discovery of the forge (1.68). However, whether their mistake counts as related to their overall approach depends on whether we are evaluating an individual or a community. If a man who, to his ruin, faithfully interpreted an oracle given by a corrupt oracle, that is his bad luck. However, if we are evaluating that whole people, it may be that the existence of corrupt oracles reflects badly on their community. The oracle-interpreting

---

<sup>12</sup> Curiously, Sayers notes that some persons fated to bring about disaster attempt to defuse the tension of their situation by intentionally fulfilling the oracle in a way that causes little damage. Sayers cites a folktale of a young woman who while the household is away empties her father's house of furniture so that she can fulfill the prophecy that she will burn it down with minimal cost (Sayers, 1963: p. 249). This technique is similar to Herodotus's story of oath-fulfillment: a man tricked into vowing to throw his friend's daughter into the sea fulfills his oath by lowering her down and hauling her back up (4.154–5).

process puts the city's integrity is on display, and it is notable that most of the successful oracle stories involve the co-operation of a community.

In fact if we look closer at Herodotus's assignment of responsibility, we see he does not always expect people to guess in advance what the right interpretation of the oracle will be. If they, like Croesus, leap to misinterpret, that is a problem. But if, lacking an answer, they wait to recognize it when they see it, that strategy meets with Herodotus' approval. Herodotus praises Lichas, who "put two and two together" when he looked at the forge (1.68). By contrast, the Siphnians, and Arkesilaos, and Croesus, not only failed to find a correct interpretation in advance, but they looked at what fulfilled their oracle but did not recognize it.

In Cambyses' case, we blame him not so much because he thought the prophecy referred to his brother (though perhaps he ought to have been slightly more skeptical about it), but because he thought he could cheat the oracle, and because he thought the dream gave him license to do away with his brother. It is precisely this mindset that cannot be separated out from the oracle interpretation process; it is *because* the powerful think that they have the power to act that they interpret oracles in a way which allows them to use their power.

In conclusion, by viewing oracle interpretation in its broader context we are able to respond to the earlier worries about Herodotean oracles. By exploring these two coherent attitudes towards oracles, we can show that despite the ambiguity of oracles people can have reasonable confidence that they will be able to find correct interpretations. Moreover, since these two coherent attitudes differ in their moral value and in their epistemic success, we can also reconcile the ambiguity of oracles with the idea that oracle recipients are morally responsible for their interpretations. Finally, this approach combines the strengths of Maurizio's view that Herodotean oracles are important for telling stories of divine-human interaction without conceding the possibility of successful oracle interpretations. Rather, understanding the moral and epistemic attitudes adopted by oracle recipients towards uncertainty is vital for appreciating the dynamics of Herodotus's stories, whether they be stories of divine attempts to test or educate human communities or hubristic human attempts to test the gods.

## Bibliography

- Fontenrose, J. (1978). *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Georges, P. B. (1986). Saving Herodotus' Phenomena: The Oracles and the Events of 480 B.C. *Classical Antiquity*, 5(1), 14–59.



- Harrison, T. (2000). *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kindt, J. (2006). Delphic Oracle Stories and the Beginning of Historiography: Herodotus' Croesus Logos. *Classical Philology*, 101, 34–51.
- Lateiner, D. (2007). Oracles, Religion, and Politics in Herodotus. In R. B. Strassler (Ed.), *The Landmark Herodotus: the histories* (pp. 810–815). New York: Pantheon.
- Marinatos, N. (1981). Thucydides and Oracles. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 101, 138–140.
- Maurizio, L. (1997). Delphic Oracles as Oral Performances: Authenticity and Historical Evidence. *Classical Antiquity*, 16(2), 308–334.
- Ovid (1986). *Metamorphoses*. (Trans. A. D. Melville.) Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Parke, H. W., & Wormell, D. E. W. (1956). *The Delphic Oracle* (I. and II.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pelling, C. (2006). Educating Croesus: Talking and Learning in Herodotus' Lydian. *Classical Antiquity*, 25(1), 141–177.
- Shapiro, S. (1996). Herodotus and Solon. *Classical Antiquity*, 15(2), 348–364.
- Sayers, D. (1963). Oedipus Simplex: Freedom and Fate in Folklore and Fiction. In Ead., *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (pp. 243–261). London: Gollancz.
- Walsh, L. (2003). The Rhetoric of Oracles. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 33(3), 55–78.
- Zagzebski, L., & Fairweather, A. (2003). Virtue Epistemology and Responsibility. *Mind*, 112(445), 178–181.
- Zagzebski, L., & Depaul, M. (2004). Intellectual Virtue. *Mind*, 113(452), 791–794.

Krista Rodkey, MA  
IU Philosophy Department  
Sycamore Hall 026, 1033 E. Third Street, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA  
krodkey@indiana.edu