

# Signifying Names and Other Ominous Accidental Utterances in Classical Historiography

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ACCIDENTS HAPPEN DAILY to human beings, but some apparent accidents—especially in anxious situations—could be divine signs. Accidental utterances and actions in antiquity were sometimes denominated as ominous (cleonomancy, *palmike*). *Kledon* or *omen* from *dictum fortuitum* implies purposive and interested supernatural powers and human efficacy in calling in their aid. To observe and mark a *kledon* persuades oneself of divine favor, god's goodwill. Odysseus and his family unintentionally meet with, ask for, and receive *kledones* in Homer. For example, Penelope interprets Telemachus' palmic (spasmic omen) sneeze. Odysseus notes and finds satisfaction in the suitors' vapid but eventually lethal good-will wish for the future of the strong and amusing beggar. Finally, when Odysseus requests an inside *kledon* and an outside *teras*, he receives Zeus' thunder out of a clear sky and the old mill-woman's prayer that she never grind for the suitors again.<sup>1</sup> The omniscient narrator of the *Odyssey* reports such hypersensitive human conversions of accident to omen in legend, yet they also appear in history and biography.<sup>2</sup> In a Roman household

<sup>1</sup> *Od.* 17.539–546, 18.112–117, 20.97–121: φήμη, τέρας, κλεήδων. Cf. A. Podlecki, "Omens in the *Odyssey*," *G&R* 14 (1967) 12–23; D. Lateiner, "Telemakhos' One Sneeze," in R. Rabel (ed.), *New Directions in Homer* (Llandysul forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> When Melanthius prays that Telemachus be struck down as surely as Odysseus is dead (*Od.* 17.251–253), the event, or the audience's present knowledge, persuades us that merely literary irony, not *kledon*, is present. The dividing line is sometimes unclear, as Peradotto's study of tragic irony and unpropitious utterances reveals: J. Peradotto, "Cledonancy in the *Oresteia*," *AJP* 90 (1969) 1–21, at 10. E. Wölfflin, "Das Wortspiel im Lateini-

example, Aemilius Paullus found an ominous meaning where *he* wanted one, in the sudden death of Aemilia's ominously named puppy, Persea (Cic. *Div.* 1.103). The coincidental omen/*kledon* foretold that he would meet success against King Perseus. Here we consider several historical public situations.

Ancient historians recognized Greek and Roman interest in omens, however unexpected and varied the ancient beliefs in such divine signs may have been to them and us. The best-known mind of antiquity, Cicero, both endorses and condemns divination of all types.<sup>3</sup> This paper examines presuppositions and surviving examples of a puzzling and poorly understood phenomenon: ancient ominous chance phrasing (especially names) and its consequences. Certain utterances can be, and need to be, accepted and recognized as ominous, then framed and interpreted, so as to have consequences. It seems that the ancients believed that the word, sacralized as foretelling the future, can evoke a desired outcome, that one can convert an accident into a favorable omen and thus bring on the deed. Careful speech and prompt response to a heedless word, especially in critical moments, were essential. This paper argues that the phenomenon of identifying chance words (especially names) as ominous was an occasional arm of diplomacy, and one relevant formulaic phrase in particular, δέχομαι τὸν οἰωνόν and its variants, often marks its employment.<sup>4</sup>

schen," *SBMünch* 2 (1887) 187–208 (non vidi), casts a wider net for Roman wordplay.

<sup>3</sup> J. Linderski, "Cicero and Roman Divination," *PdP* 37 (1982) 12–38 (= *Roman Questions* [Stuttgart 1995] 458–484), at 12; cf. Mary Beard, "Cicero and Divination: The Formation of a Latin Discourse," *JRS* 76 (1986) 33–46, at 43, 45; M. Schofield, "Cicero for and against Divination," *JRS* 76 (1986) 47–65, at 51, 56, 63. Cledonism is a branch of augury, a fact known to Aemilius Paullus, commander and augur. A. Bouché Leclercq, *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité* I–IV (Paris 1879–1882) surveys Greek (I 155–160) and Roman (IV 135–144) belief. W. R. Halliday, *Greek Divination* (London 1913) 46–53, provides a comparative introduction to omens and cledonancy in his account of divination.

<sup>4</sup> Unguarded speech, such as Peradotto, *AJP* 90 (1969) 7, 11–14, finds repeatedly in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, may lead to disastrous consequences. But only one example (1652–1653) includes the antagonistic chorus's prompt recognition and signifying acceptance of Aegistheus' unintended

The ancient Greeks cordoned off spaces recognized and organized for such meaningful chance utterances. They dedicated oracles to the verbally ominous at Achaean Pharae, Smyrna, and Lebadeia.<sup>5</sup> We do not well know the procedures, beyond sharing a dependence on the unexpected utterance or event with a hidden meaning for the consulter, but institutionalizations of cledonancy are not the present topic.<sup>6</sup> *Clédonisme sans parole* is another name for accidental ominous wordless spasms and objects. The future Corinthian ruler Aletes receives a Delphic “dirt-ball” oracle. Later, when asking for a bit of bread, a stingy farmer gives him (only) the prophesized clod of dirt.<sup>7</sup>

The present examples of accidental verbal omens, however, are oracle-free, originally casual or otherwise-intended words and acts in secular settings that men convert into meaningful divine indicators. Greek and Roman interlocutors, with their particular needs, interpret these apparently fortuitous human ejaculations and movements (words, sneezes, twitches, etc.) or events as meaningful. Quick-witted men may assign to signs a meaning and a power far removed from the most obvious or natural view of contemporaries or posterity. Any act, person, thing, and word, especially proper names, may be taboo, or may be a propitious or inauspicious omen.<sup>8</sup>

Herodotus reports two Spartan commanders (and other

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ominous message. The word-omen can “work,” whether homonymic, homophonic, or simply understood in a sense different from that intended by the speaker. P. Somville, “Jeux de mots et sense du sacré dans la religion grecque,” *Kernos* 2 (1989) 199–211, discusses examples of divine cledonic nomenclature such as *glaukos*, *delos*, *delphis*, *phoinix*, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Paus. 7.22.2, 9.11.7 (a Sanctuary of Kledones), 9.39.5–14; cf. Dio of Prusa *Or.* 32.13 and Xen. *Eph.* 5.4.8–11 on chance utterances at the oracle of Apis in Egyptian Thebes (a chorus of shouting children reveal the god’s will).

<sup>6</sup> See Bouché Leclercq, *Histoire* I 154–160; Halliday, *Divination* 229–234; W. K. Pritchett, *The Greek State at War* III (Berkeley 1979) 131–135.

<sup>7</sup> Duris *FGrHist* 76 F 84 = [Plut.] *Prov. Alex.* 1.48; Paus. 2.4.3; schol. Pind. *Nem.* 7.155; Cic. *Div.* 2.83.

<sup>8</sup> Frazer’s *Golden Bough* III (1911) devotes three hundred pages to this point.

leaders) who employ unknown, ominous names and words.<sup>9</sup> They shoehorn these fortuitous utterances to fit their strategic manoeuvres. Herodotus' admirer and emulator, Dionysius the later Halicarnassian writer and emigrant to Rome, records another example in his *Roman History*, a diplomatic incident at Tarentum. The Romans' representative converts to his nation's advantage a difficult situation by a name and an action.

### *Hellenic*

Herodotus reports omens found in the traditions of the Hellenes and the Persian Wars, including accidental verbal ones.<sup>10</sup> He also transmits historically noteworthy rhetorical figures including *paronomasia* (homonymic and homophonic plays on words, or puns, as skeptics might consider "Dorieus" and "the grove of Argos," 5.72, 6.80).<sup>11</sup> He includes narratives of tangible objects and visible acts that convey wordless messages of a humanly ominous import.<sup>12</sup> The ironic trope that combines

<sup>9</sup> Thucydides eschews paronomastic observations, although he certainly expresses interest in linguistic degeneration in the Corcyraean *stasis*. The names of Eupompidas, Alcidas (at Heracleia), and Euphemus provide opportunities for comment that the Athenian historian ignored (3.20.2, 3.92–93, 6.81; cf. S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides II* [Oxford 1996] 134–136).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. T. Harrison, *Divinity and History. The Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford 2000) 129.

<sup>11</sup> Powell's list of puns is hardly exhaustive: E. Powell, "Puns in Herodotus," *CR* 51 (1937) 103–105. Meaningful words and names provide an important category in folk-belief and folk-say. The phenomenon posits that the essence of a person is found in his/her name, that the fit is cosmic, that a true inwardness is revealed by names. Examples are *váppη* for the sting ray and Plato's comic musings on bonds between word and referent in the *Cratylus* (e.g. *soma/sema*); a summary in Jane Snyder, *Puns and Poetry in Lucretius De Rerum Natura* (Amsterdam 1980) 56–60.

<sup>12</sup> S. West, "The Scythian Ultimatum (Hdt. iv 131, 132)," *JHS* 108 (1988) 207–211; Carolyn Dewald, "Reading the World: The Interpretation of Objects in Herodotus' Histories," in R. Rosen and J. Farrell (eds.), *Nomodeiktēs. Greek Studies in Honor of Martin Ostwald* (Ann Arbor 1993) 55–70, at 56–58; and D. Felton, "Advice to Tyrants: The Motif of 'Enigmatic Counsel' in Greek and Roman Texts," *Phoenix* 52 (1998) 42–54, at 45–48, discuss articulate objects, inter alia the Scythian rebus ultimatum, Cambyses' lettuce head-stripping, and Thrasybulus' grain-cutting (4.131–132, 3.32, 5.92ζ).

divine knowledge and verbal coincidence is a *kledon*, religiously conceived, a proper name or other word that becomes ominously meaningful in certain identified circumstances.

Several laconic<sup>13</sup> Spartans find, at the right moment, a significance lurking in words. (1) The invading King Cleomenes riposted to the priestess of Athena on the Athenian Acropolis after she told the Dorian to depart at once: “Woman, I am not *Dorieus*, but *Achaios* [i.e., descendant of Argive Heracles].” Herodotus notes: “Not catching [or misusing] the *kledon*,” he was forcibly expelled from the Acropolis. His quick retort attempted to reject, avert, or defuse an omen specified as *kledon*.<sup>14</sup> This play on words may secondarily and cleverly refer to his impressive half-brother on his father’s side, *Dorieus*, over whom Cleomenes was preferred for the Spartan throne (5.42).

Herodotus explained the choice of name for Cleomenes’ unfortunate enemy Demaratus (6.63–64) as the result of a public Spartan vow friendly to his father Ariston: πανδημεὶ Σπαρτιῆται ... ἀρὴν ἐποίησαντο. “Blessed by the people” or “accursed for the people” are equally possible interpretations, both of them probably articulated, depending on prospective or retrospective perspectives.

(2) Again, ca. 491 the same Cleomenes,<sup>15</sup> a man whom Herodotus undervalues, once effectively blocked from arresting defiant Aeginetan “allies” and then further insulted by one of these Aeginetans, asks his interlocutor his name. Once he obtains that potent information, namely *Krios* or “Ram,”<sup>16</sup> he retaliates to perceived humiliation with an ominous and

<sup>13</sup> Plut. *Lyc.* 19–20 and *Apoph.Lac.* collect examples of Spartan brevity.

<sup>14</sup> Hdt. 5.72.3–4; similarly Hipparchus vainly tried to avert his dream-omen, 5.56 with Halliday, *Divination* 49.

<sup>15</sup> The same ill-remembered Cleomenes experienced another, prior inauspicious verbal coincidence: his “taking” the grove named for the hero Argos disappointingly too soon (for him) fulfills a Delphic prophecy of victory (6.80, as Deborah Boedeker has pointed out to me).

<sup>16</sup> Recall the dangerous power of the name for curse or blessing in *Od.* 9.408, 504–505, 528–535.

“snappy”<sup>17</sup> threat: “Krios, you had better coat your horns with bronze [armor] because much trouble is coming your way” (6.50).<sup>18</sup> This is more than a witty anecdote; it announces Spartan awareness of Aeginetan hostility and justifies aggressive response. The ominous-name finder gains divine ground for his policy. God is on his side.

(3) Although *kledon* as such is not specified, another ominous diplomatic utterance surfaces in central Greece in 480. Xerxes, accompanied by Mardonius, laughingly responds to a Spartan herald demanding compensation (at Delphi’s suggestion) for Spartan Leonidas’ death and mutilation at Thermopylae (8.115). “Mardonius here will pay the penalty.”<sup>19</sup> The Spartan herald δεξάμενος τὸ ῥηθέν, “having welcomed/accepted the response,” effectively rendered it thereby a *kledon*. Ex post facto, the Persians were now trapped. The outcome for Mardonius at

<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Dewald’s characterization of his repartée: “Notes” to *Herodotus, The Histories*, transl. R. Waterfield (New York 1998), ad loc.

<sup>18</sup> Herodotus, aware of name taboos and magical word-power, notes that Krios (unwisely) told the Spartan the truth, ὁ δὲ οἱ τὸ ἐὼν ἔφρασε. Odysseus escapes Polyphemos by means of the false name, the pun Οὐτίς, but comes to grief and nearly dies because he reveals his own (and likewise ominous tale-telling) true name, probably—and at least popularly—derived from ὀδύνη, pain (*Od.* 9.366, 504–555; 19.409; 1.60–62); cf. G. E. Dimock, “The Name of Odysseus,” *Hudson Review* 9 (1956) 52–70, at 52–56, but more “odysseused rather than odysseusing”; C. S. Brown, “Odysseus and Polyphemos: The Name and the Curse,” *CompLit* 18 (1966) 193–202, at 197–199 on name taboos, οὐκ ὀνομαστήν (19.260 = 597 = 23.19); Peradotto, *AJP* 90 (1969) 4–6; R. Friedrich, “Heroic Man and *Polymetis*,” *GRBS* 28 (1987) 121–133, at 131. W. W. How and J. Wells, *Commentary on Herodotus II* (Oxford 1912) 82, cite other puns in Cic. *Verr.* 2.4.53, 95, and Shakespeare, *Richard II* II.i. H. Holst, *Die Wortspiele in Ciceros Reden* (*SymbOslo* Suppl. 1 [1925]) 99–116, registers Cicero’s comic wordplay in oratory, often deliberate distortion of familiar names, developed precisely to ridicule opponents such as Verres. The practice is already found in Homer with comments on Paris and Iros.

<sup>19</sup> For Xerxes’ laugh, see D. Lateiner, “No Laughing Matter: A Literary Tactic in Herodotus,” *TAPA* 107 (1977) 173–182, at 178–180, “unconscious irony”; for the formula δίκας δίδόναι, Lateiner, “A Note on ΔΙΚΑΣ ΔΙΔΟΝΑΙ in Herodotus,” *CQ* 30 (1980) 30–32.

the battle of Plataea was sealed.<sup>20</sup>

(4) Similarly, one can explain the decision to engage in the battle of Mycale in 479 as determined by *kledon* (9.90–91). The Spartan king Leotychidas commanded the Greek fleet anchored near Delos. Three Samian ambassadors were dispatched to importune the Hellenic command for liberation. In their diplomatic parley, one Samian developed various lengthy (πολλὰ καὶ παντοῖα) East Greek arguments designed to persuade them to lead the Hellenic expeditionary fleet across the Aegean to liberate Ionia. The Spartan admiral, perhaps impatient with the long address (πολλὸς ἦν λισσόμενος) and with its hyperbolic rhetoric about not meeting any Persian resistance, asked, seemingly irrelevantly, the Ionian for his name. An odd interruption, in any view. Herodotus expresses uncertainty about his question's immediate motive but offers interesting alternative explanations. First, he suggests that the Spartan was looking for diplomatic advantage through divine confirmation: εἶρετο Λευτυχίδης εἴτε κληδόνας<sup>21</sup> εἵνεκεν θέλων πυθέσθαι εἴτε καὶ κατὰ συντυχίην θεοῦ ποιεῖντος,<sup>22</sup> “Leo-

<sup>20</sup> Halliday, *Divination* 47. With nearly identical phrasing, Peisistratus accepts a chresmologue's “oracle” about netting tunny fish (1.63, φῶς δέκεσθαι τὸ χρησθέν). Here the omen is a divinely channeled mantic utterance, not an accidental *kledon*, but again, Peisistratus' accepting it somehow made it potent and irrevocable (cf. Pritchett, *Greek State* 135).

<sup>21</sup> κληδών, the Homeric word on the *kal-* stem, when meaning “divinely meaningful verbal coincidence,” appears at *Od.* 18.117 and 20.120, and in Herodotus only here and 5.72.4 (Cleomenes' “grove of Argos”).

<sup>22</sup> *Kledon* refers to (divine and therefore consequential) verbal omen, and the historian's alternative, *syntychia*, to a mere chance coincidence; but *συντυχίην θεοῦ ποιεῖντος* should mean “god-sent coincidence.” The usual understanding of these alternatives presents a distinction without a difference for the Spartan's motive—both are theological. Herodotus' first term, in fact, provides a political and human exploitation of an apparent surprise. Leotychidas manipulates religious sentiment conveniently to promote his political ends. A. Masaracchia, *Erodoto Le Storie IX* (Milan 1978) ad loc., argues that this passage should deter categorization of Herodotean explanations as entirely theological or human (“o solo teonomico o solo antroponomico”). The first historical motivational alternative balances the second, popular and religious, “explanation,” or it provides a historian's

tychidas asked him his name, whether wishing to know for the sake of a [useful] *kledon* or whether, even by some coincidence, a god made him do it.” Herodotus’ presentation suggests that the Spartan king was looking for a convenient and public divine endorsement for an already determined military project.<sup>23</sup> The alternative, that he was stumbling eastward with the Greek armada but before developing a plan, under divine prodding, does not conform to usual cautious Spartan procedures for crafting international policy-decisions. Having ascertained his interlocutor’s name, *Hegesistratos*, “Expedition-Leader,” the Spartan immediately truncated the pleader’s typical Ionian verbosity<sup>24</sup> and said *δέκομαι τὸν οἰωνόν*, “I accept this omen”—i.e., I welcome as a valid omen your divinatory name *Hegesistratos*.<sup>25</sup> That simple answer of a name stamped a divine approval on the Hellenic advance: I will *lead the expeditionary force* (*ἡγέομαι τὸν στρατόν*) against the Persians. The Hellenes attack and defeat the Persian forces at Mycale.

The word “nonverbal” understates the Spartans’ esteem for speechlessness and brachyology.<sup>26</sup> Men of action disdained noise and superfluous talk. The Homeric model inculcated

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escape-hatch when motivation is uncertain: cf. D. Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto 1989) 196–210.

<sup>23</sup> R. W. Macan, *Herodotus, the Seventh, Eighth, & Ninth Books* (London 1908) ad loc., notes, in his usual acerbic way, that the “king was surely acquainted with the name of the orator addressing the Council, before the speaking began.”

<sup>24</sup> The Spartan authorities had responded in rhyme to an earlier Samian embassy (3.46) *τὰ μὲν πρῶτα λεχθέντα ἐπιλεληθέναι, τὰ δὲ ὕστερα οὐ συνιέναι*, “We’ve forgotten what you said before; we don’t understand what you said afterwards.” The Samians cut talk to one sentence, “This bag needs grain,” but the Spartans retorted that any words were superfluous.

<sup>25</sup> The verb, in contexts involving divine matters, connotes a gracious welcoming and understanding of supernatural intentions, not merely neutral “receiving”: LSJ s.v. I.2.b.

<sup>26</sup> E. David, “Sparta’s Kosmos of Silence,” in S. Hodkinson and A. Powell (eds.), *Sparta. New Perspectives* (London 1999) 117–146 (e.g. 119 on silence as a tool of discipline), discusses the topos, prominent in Thucydides, e.g. 1.86 and 2.40.2 (Sthenelaidas and Pericles). See also Hdt. 3.82.2, Thuc. 4.80, 5.68, Xen. *Const.Lac.* 3.4–5.



Heroic silence: the fierce, austere Achaeans advance into battle in silence while the Trojans and their allies move ahead noisily (*Il.* 3.2–9; cf. *Hdt.* 7.211, 9.59, or Hollywood’s closed-mouth cowboys and howling Indians). The Spartan code of silence, like their hair and dress protocols, was a tool of discipline to shape the young and to humiliate and exclude the ostracized.<sup>27</sup> Thus the taciturn non-act (zero-degree phonation) can be fiercely aggressive (or “passive aggressive,” or just passive silence).<sup>28</sup> The classical Laconian word-averse culture prized apophthegms, if words were necessary. Objects and visuals were preferred, when possible, to otiose talk. They approved and remembered the laconically styled Samian sack message and Spartan Amompharetus’ boulder, his big vote by the big pebble for remaining at Plataea (*Hdt.* 3.46, 9.55). To articulate was to endanger a secret—thus their diplomatic codes on the *skytale*, their *Krypteia* or “Secret Service,” and their “silence about silence.”<sup>29</sup> Their notoriously extreme scorn for wordiness—Ionian or Athenian rhetoric in particular—was expressed in cutting speech, as with the Samians (3.46) or with commander Pausanias’ wordless show and brief verbal comparison of Spartan and Persian feasts and implements (9.82.2–3). They rate the allegedly non-rhetorical sight and sound as (divinatory) sign superior to organized speeches and especially to the culture of books.

Immerwahr wondered whether Hellenes *selected* seers, commanders, and ambassadors for their tell-tale, ominous names.<sup>30</sup> This seems unlikely for several reasons. “Speaking names” are

<sup>27</sup> E.g. Aristodamus “the trembler”: *Hdt.* 7.231; D. Lateiner, “The Style of Herodotus: A Case Study (7.229),” *CW* 95 (2002) 363–371, at 366, 370–371.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. S. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton 2000) 282–283.

<sup>29</sup> David, in Hodkinson/Powell, *Sparta* 117.

<sup>30</sup> H. R. Immerwahr, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Cleveland 1966) 295 n.164; cf. Hornblower, *Commentary* II 189 and n.72. E.g., Teisamenus 9.33, Hippomachus 9.38.2, Callimachus the auspicious Marathon archon 6.109, this and another Hegisistratus 9.37; cf. for the *Namenglauben* Plut. *Nic.* 1.2. Harrison, *Divinity* 263 n.48, compiles a list of possible entries; cf. Herodotus’ interest in name-histories for Cypselus and Demaratus: 5.92ε1 and 6.63.3.

common enough in Greek and not least in Herodotus. Harrison rightly sees such wordplay as pre-literary,<sup>31</sup> a popular obsession encouraged by the very meaningfulness of Greek names. While parents might choose names on the basis of fond wishes for their children's future, Greeks did not entrust their precious lives to commanders for that reason alone. Nevertheless, Hornblower may rightly have identified an aversion of Thucydides to ominous names when he suggests that he was "reacting against Herodotus" and popular fifth-century practice by avoiding the mention of "lucky names."<sup>32</sup> Thucydides, as part of his silent polemics against Herodotus' quirky inclusions and popular religion, may distance himself from ominous names that Herodotus' radar registered as significant—or at least noteworthy to his audiences. The unimpressive Alcidas, the Spartan general delegated as a founder of Heraclia (3.92–93), may in fact have been chosen precisely for his name and no other reason. The phenomenalist Herodotus "might have made something more of" that apparent coincidence—might have found Spartan policy in the exploitation of myth and religion—but the analyst Thucydides intentionally neglected to explain his odd choice as *oikist*.<sup>33</sup>

If this is so, one has further confirmation of late fifth century interest in meaningful, ominous names, beyond archaic Homer and the Attic tragedians.<sup>34</sup> What might seem contrived to a historian, in hearing epic or seeing tragic myth, could seem to others a noteworthy verbal fact in recent events. In the Herodotean cases, Herodotus draws attention not to mere

<sup>31</sup> Harrison, *Divinity* 263 and n.48.

<sup>32</sup> S. Hornblower, "Thucydides' Use of Herodotus," in J. M. Sanders (ed.), *Philolakon. Lakonian Studies in Honour of Hector Catling* (London 1992) 141–154, at 142, 151–152.

<sup>33</sup> Hornblower, *Commentary* II 135.

<sup>34</sup> ἐπώνυμος, such as Homer's Odysseus or Megapenthes: cf. M. Sulzberger, "Onoma eponymon: les noms propres chez Homère et dans la mythologie grecque," *REG* 39 (1926) 381–477; Aesch. *Ag.* 686–690 on Helen; 1652–1653, δεχομένους λέγεις θανεῖν γε, with E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus Agamemnon* III (Oxford 1950) ad loc., and Peradotto, *AJP* 90 (1969) 1–3; Soph. *Aj.* 430–433, 914; *OT*; *El.* 668; Eur. *Bacch.* 367 with E. R. Dodds, *Euripides Bacchae*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1960) ad loc. on "Pentheus."

humorous appropriateness, but to real historical consequences of events perceived by some as unintended omens.

*Roman*

Our lacunose record furnishes more Roman narratives of “ominous word” divinatory actions, including diplomacy. That record is richer in examples including unintentional word omens, in part because of the survival of Cicero’s curious and controversial treatise *De divinatione*.<sup>35</sup> For instance, Valerius and Salvius are names of good omen, and men so auspiciously named (*homines bono nomine*) were often selected, in Roman civic and military life, to lead sacrifices and to serve as first recruits (*Div.* 1.102–104; cf. *Artem. Oneir.* 3.38). Romans in political assembly closely attended to the names of the first voter and the choice of the first century, determined by sortition (itself a form of divination) to vote first in the *comitia* and thus to predict the gods’ will (*praerogativa*, *Cic. Mur.* 18.38, cf. *Div.* 2.83). The less expected the event or utterance, the more powerful its potential as an unintended word-omen.

Romans transformed incidental words and acts into divine signs by formal reception.<sup>36</sup> Thus they took precautions at ceremonies so as to hear only words of favorable omen. Great consequences turned on “the right word spoken at the right time” (Liebeschuetz, *Continuity* 26) or vice-versa. Some deemed the very name of Rome (the Greek means “Strength”) prophetic of its power.<sup>37</sup> On a different level, Xenophon (*Cyn.* 7.5)

<sup>35</sup> See Beard, *JRS* 76 (1986) 33–46, and Schofield, *JRS* 76 (1986) 49–56, on Cicero’s attitude to divination; D. Levene, *Religion in Livy* (Leiden/New York 1993), esp. 141–161 on Livy’s use of omens in his first decade. J. Bayet, “La croyance romaine aux présages déterminants: aspects littéraires et chronologie,” *Hommages à Joseph Bidez et à Franz Cumont* (Brusselles 1949) 13–30, at 13, examines the dramatists, annalists, and other sources to determine (by *sondage*) whether omens merely prefigured or determined the event, and whether the answer to this question changed over time.

<sup>36</sup> J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford 1979) 25–27, quoting *Liv.* 5.55; cf. 1.56.6, *Val. Max.* 1.5.1, 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Plut. Rom.* 1–2; A. Erskine, “Rome in the Greek World: The Significance of a Name,” in A. Powell (ed.), *The Greek World* (London 1995) 368–382; for the names of dogs, compare Actaeon’s hunt-pack (*Ov. Met.* 3.206–

requires owners of hunting dogs to give names to them appropriate to their purpose, like Θυμός, Φύλαξ, Ἀλκή, Ῥώμη, Βία, κ.τ.λ.

Such “coincidental” signs may presage an event, a fortuitous consonance, and current preoccupations may then press them into good service, public or private. Indeed, they need to be noticed and accepted,<sup>38</sup> and sometimes even adapted or perverted, before they are deemed able to affect the situation. They certainly need to be acknowledged as *kledones* in order to be framed as ominous at all, in order to be separated out as more than insignificant chatter or bluster.<sup>39</sup> One can accept,<sup>40</sup>

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232) catalogue, thirty-eight “speaking” canine names. Also in a comic mode, Cicero finds prophetic meaning in Verres’ name, equating him with a hog (*Verr.* 2.1.121, 2.4.95) and a broom (2.2.19, 52; 2.4.53, 57 with another pun on Piso Frugi’s name). Quintilian 6.3.53 finds such jests “frigid.”

<sup>38</sup> Liebeschuetz, *Continuity* 24; e.g. Plaut. *Epid.* 396, Sen. *Cons. Marc.* 9.4; *TLL IX.2* (1981) s.v. “omen.”

<sup>39</sup> Greeks pay less attention to omens but rarely reject them. Dositheus (Keil, *Gramm. Lat.* 430) offers ἀποϊονίζεσθαι as an equivalent to Latin terms of rejection, but this word is not to be found elsewhere. Homer’s heroes debate the value of auspices and ominous sounds and even appropriate the omens of others for their own benefit: *Il.* 15.377–380, 12.237–243, 18.272, 24.292; *Od.* 2.181ff.; Eur. *Or.* 788. Later Greek and early Roman comedy abounds in stock characters and *Redende Namen* (M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* [Princeton 1961] 129). The tell-tale name is a well-known feature of *Märchen* folktales (Jacob’s sons [Gen. 30:6–24], Perrault’s Barbe-Bleue, the Grimm brothers’ *Schneeweiss*, *Aschenputtel*, *Dornröschen*, etc.). B. L. Hijmans, “Significant Names and their Function in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*,” in B. L. Hijmans and R. van der Paardt (eds.), *Aspects of Apuleius’ Golden Ass* (Groningen 1978) 107–122, at 107–108, brilliantly discusses onomastic allusion and play, *Anspielung* and *Spielerei* (as Rohde called it), especially in Apuleius’ novel, but with rich references to other genres and ancient awareness (e.g. 118 n.8) and reception of the *locus de persona* phenomena.

<sup>40</sup> See Xen. *Anab.* 1.8.16 for the watchword chosen for Cyrus’ Greek troops and the Persian ruler’s acceptance of it: δέχομαί τε καὶ τοῦτο ἔστω. Luc. *De laps.* 8 (Alexander and Hephaestion); Liv. 1.7, 5.55, 9.14.8, 29.27.12, cf. Polyb. 3.22.5; Val. Max. 1.5.1, *ea enim voce audita senatus accipere se omen respondit.*

avert, or reject<sup>41</sup> an ominous sign. “To accept an omen” by formal announcement gave it almost irrevocable force; thus, the verbal acceptance contributes to produce the desired result.<sup>42</sup> Romans, in extant sources, are more attentive to ominous words and consequently must find ways to reject or more often avert them.<sup>43</sup> They have more confidence in the magical efficacy of their uttered rejections and displacements of omens. Phrases like *absit omen* or *procul omen abesto* can exorcise dangers.<sup>44</sup>

Roman religion and popular thought discovered reasons to act or not to act that depended on names and chance utterances.<sup>45</sup> The Romans took a similar pleasure but more interest

<sup>41</sup> Aeneas successfully accepts omens that he likes (*Aen.* 5.530–531), but Vergil gives him a choice. The Rutulian augur Tolumnius, however, errs (12.259). Latin technical words for rejecting omens include *abnuere*, *improbare*, *refutare*, *exsecrare*, *abominari omen*, as at Livy 6.18.9, 30.25. Halliday, *Divination* 50; Liebeschuetz, *Continuity* 24–27. When Cleomenes “failed to use/deal with” the Acropolis priestess’s *kledon*, his campaign faltered (Hdt. 5.72.4), and this story reports his inability to avert the consequences.

<sup>42</sup> Halliday, *Divination* 46–53. Manipulation of augural, or other more common religious, phenomena is not incompatible with belief—as *kledones* help us to see. Polybius 6.56.6–15 portrays the Roman élite as convinced believers. Ancient religion was intertwined with magic, convictions that humans can influence divine decisions. Prayers on modern sports playing-fields reflect the same attitudes.

<sup>43</sup> Bouché Leclercq, *Histoire* IV 137–144; *omen respuat* in Sen. *Cons.Marc.* 9.4.

<sup>44</sup> Serv. *ad Aen.* 5.530, 12.259; Ov. *Am.* 1.14.41; Cic. *Phil.* 4.10, *Div.* 2.77, *Har.Resp.* 20.42; Liv. 30.25.12; Plin. *HN* 28.17. See Halliday, *Divination* 50; E. Riess, “Omen,” *RE* 18 (1939) 350–378, at 356–359.

<sup>45</sup> E.g., Cic. *Div.* 2.84 and Plin. *HN* 15.83 report that Crassus, when headed east for Carrhae, heard a fig-salesman shout *cauneas* [figs] and should have recognized it for *cave ne eas* and stayed home. The happy Octavian before Actium in Plut. *Ant.* 65.5 heard a muleteer report the names Εὐτυχος for himself and Νίκων for his ass, *Lucky* and *Victory*. Further, Plut. *Caes.* 42–43, Suet. *Aug.* 96.2, Plut. *Nic.* 1.2, Val. Max 1.5.3 *fortuito dicto*. Plutarch *Sert.* 1.3 gathers frivolous (to him, anyway) coincidences in names and attributes, such as great one-eyed generals like Hannibal and Sertorius.

than the Greeks in finding meaning in names, driven perhaps by greater belief in *kleidonomancy*. Cicero's efforts show that irresistible entertainment emerged from signifying names, even in supposedly serious judicial venues.<sup>46</sup> Historical incidents hinge on such names and occasionally show life imitating art (see below on Philonides).

The Roman omen and prodigy *Apparat* effectively served to promote military morale. The commanders employed *auspicia oblativa* and *impetrata* and other *omina* to arouse ardor that reinforced cohesion, promoted self-fulfilling prophecies, and thus increased military success. External data might confirm the bold in their boldness, relieve the fearful in their fear, so the effective official would bend good and bad unexpected events to his need. All could be useful. The commander interpreted them to his advantage, without entirely disbelieving in their divinity.<sup>47</sup> Frontinus (*Strat.* 1.12) discusses how to neutralize unexpected divine bad news, *de dissolvendo metu quem milites ex ad-*

<sup>46</sup> E. S. McCartney, "Puns and Plays on Proper Names," *CJ* 14 (1919) 343–358, considers 330 Latin puns, 75 from Cicero. Several of these depend on names that fulfill or disappoint an expectation raised by the literal interpretation of a name (349–352). He draws attention to explicit passages in the ancients including Soph. *Aj.* 430–433 (ἐπώνυμον); *Od.* 19.407–409 (naming the hero); *Hymn.Hom.Ven.* 198; Cic. *Div.* 1.45.102–104 (*bonis nominibus*), *Scaur.* 30; Liv. 28.28.4, 29.27.12–13; Suet. *Aug.* 96.2. Less relevant to this paper but perhaps more frequent are puns in Latin poetry. See J. C. Austin, *The Significant Name in Terence* (Illinois Stud. Lang. Lit. 7.4 [1922]) 129, for a list of significant comic names in Terence; Snyder, *Puns* 92, 105–108, 119, on Lucretius' *Namenglauben*. Catullus' poems can turn on a *nom parlant*, e.g. *Carm.* 102, 104. C. J. Fordyce, "Puns on Names in Greek," *CJ* 28 (1932/3) 44–46, and W. M. Seaman, *The Appropriate Name in Plautus* (diss. U. Illinois 1939: 28 for old men, 30 for young men) and "On the Names of Old and Young Men in Plautus," in *Classical Studies presented to Ben Edwin Perry* (Urbana 1969) 114–122, supplement McCartney.

<sup>47</sup> See Polyb. 6.56.6–12 on Roman popular and elite credence (Mauersberger's *Polybios-Lexicon* has no example of *kleidon*); cf. Cic. *Nat.D.* 1.118. Cf. L. R. Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar* (Berkeley 1949) 76–97, "Manipulating the State Religion"; Linderski, *PdP* 37 (1982) 12–38, distinguishes Cicero's support for *religio* from his scorn for *superstitio*; J. Rüpke, *Domus Militariae* (diss. Tübingen 1990) 148–151. Kurt Raaflaub directed me to several useful passages.

*versis conceperint ominibus*. Officers should comprehend that they can manipulate even an unfortunate stumble or pratfall, so that it seems a good omen, by quick-witted, encouraging interpretation. He offers ingenious Greek and Roman examples: Epaminondas and Chabrias, Scipio and Caesar.<sup>48</sup>

M. Marcellus, five times consul and augur, closed his litter to avoid receiving omens that interfered with his immediate plans (Cic. *Div.* 2.77–78). Appius Claudius infamously disregarded the sacred chickens off the coast at Drepanum in 249 B.C. (*Div.* 1.29, *Nat.D.* 2.7), and the consul Flaminius disregarded his horse's collapse, the chickens, and yet other omens, before his disaster at Lake Trasimene in 217.<sup>49</sup> Some Romans chose to believe that their catastrophic losses resulted from willful, gross negligence of divine signs. These commanders failed to convert celestial bad news or redirect it. These manipulative procedures, once expedient because widely believed, had become less frequent by Cicero's day (*Div.* 1.77–78). Caesar's *Commentarii* mention no omens, auspices, or haruspices<sup>50</sup>—a sign of the *pontifex maximus*'s cynicism or rationalism and his era's growing skepticism.

(5) Cicero (*Div.* 1.103, cf. 2.83–84) provides an important Roman example of the *kledon* from the heroic past. L. Aemilius Paullus, about to depart for war against King Perseus of Macedonia and the decisive battle at Pydna (168 B.C.), hears that his daughter's puppy has died, the *catellus* Persea (Perseus in some texts; Pease ad loc. provides citations). He instantly says, perhaps to her puzzlement: *accipio, inquit, mea filia, omen*. Plutarch, in his life of Aemilius Paullus, repeats this anecdote. He explicitly depends on Cicero's account, quoting (or translating) the formula: *δέχομαι τὸν οἰωνόν*.<sup>51</sup>

The Roman diplomat or magistrate in Hellenistic historiography sometimes imitates the roles of Herodotus' Spartans.

<sup>48</sup> One consular speaker alleges that auspices can be fabricated and still remain valid: Liv. 10.40.11, with Linderski, *PdP* 37 (1982) 32 and n.48.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. A. S. Pease, *Ciceronis De Divinatione* (Urbana 1920) ad 1.29.

<sup>50</sup> Linderski, *PdP* 37 (1982) 36.

<sup>51</sup> *Aem.* 10.6–8, *Rom. Apophth.* 197F–198A; cf. Liv. 44.22, 34, Val. Max. 1.5.3.

Men of might representing a powerful state, laconic in word, they were quick to take offense and express anger in a manner both witty and ominous.<sup>52</sup> A notorious diplomatic insult, the Tarentines' amusement at momentary Roman expense,<sup>53</sup> appears cryptically in Polybius 1.6.5 (ἀσέλγεια; cf. App. *Samn.* 7, Livy *Per.* 12–15). Dionysius' *Roman Antiquities* 19 provides a longer, tripartite version “revealing” Tarentine democratic and alcoholic turbulence. His account of an unintended omen may relate to his Halicarnassian model's use of omens. We recall relevant features.<sup>54</sup>

Tarentum, a powerful commercial city, was notoriously dedicated to pleasure, and to drama in particular.<sup>55</sup> Tarentine insobriety and luxury (τροφή) became topics for enemies' legendary stories about their democratic decadence. E.g., the townsmen had more feast days than days in the year and became drunk at Dionysus' festival drinking contests. They were drunk every day by agora business time.<sup>56</sup> Their devotion to theatrical make-believe was usefully reprehensible to Roman ideology.

<sup>52</sup> Plutarch juxtaposes *Spartan and Roman Apophthegms* (*Mor.* 194–236, after *Kings and Generals*). He seeks parallels between the two nations' individuals in significant *Lives* (*Lycurgus* and *Numa*, *Lysander* and *Sulla*).

<sup>53</sup> Parallel violations of international or divine law lead to woe for the incautious insulters of Rome. The Romans were adept at insulting diplomatic gestures of their own, perhaps most notoriously G. Popillius Laenas' “line in the sand” drawn around Antiochus IV at Eleusis near Alexandria in 168 B.C., Polyb. 29.27.5. A. Wardman, *Religion and Statecraft among the Romans* (Ithaca 1982), has no comment on events before the Second Punic War.

<sup>54</sup> A. Eckstein, *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius* (Berkeley 1995) 285–289, “Polybius on Drinking and Drunkenness,” cites Herodotus and Tacitus on inebriation. The drunken Tarentines' citadel—held by a drunken Roman commander, M. Livius—fell to Hannibal in 213 (Polyb. 8.25–30; cf. Broughton, *MRR* I 262 n.7); Syracusans while drunk fell to Marcellus shortly thereafter (8.37.2–11).

<sup>55</sup> Bieber, *History* 137, quoting Zon. 8.2, Cass. Dio fr.39.5.

<sup>56</sup> A. P. McKinlay, “Ancient Experience with Intoxicating Drinks: Non-Attic Greek States,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 10 (1949) 289–315, at 306 collects references to Tarentine alcoholic levity, including, seriatim, Strab. 6.3.4, Pl. *Leg.* 637B, Ath. 166D–E, Ael. *VH* 12.30 = Theopompus *FGrHist* 115 F 100. Behind these sources probably stand Timaeus and Aristotle's Πολιτεία Ταραντίνων (fr.590 Rose = Poll. 9.80).



Romans, in contrast, did not permit a permanent theater to be built until Pompey's in 55 B.C. Indeed, crude dramas, mimes, and parodies of tragedy flourished in southern Italy at just the time of this diplomatic outrage. The tale of a major Hellenic port city's low amusements and poor diplomatic conduct, lack of official and unofficial hospitality, in a city allied with Rome's antagonist Pyrrhus, also helped to justify (for Romans and their Greek apologists) Roman retaliation.

The antecedents of the next ominous word incident, occurring at Tarentum ca. 282 B.C., are obscure. Thurii, hostile to the Tarentines, invited the Romans to intervene on the Italian instep.<sup>57</sup> The Roman contingent and their Thurian allies lost one battle, but the Romans gained various nearby allies who resented Tarentine power and interference. L. Valerius Flaccus (or Cornelius) led ten ships, for no good reason that apologists could invent, beyond the Lacinian Promontory, a limit of Roman action and political sphere in the standing, valid treaty of 302 B.C. The Tarentines had reason to believe their treaty rights had been violated. The Romans needed excuses for incursions.

In the first (improbable) incident, filled with wine at Dionysus' theatric festival, the Tarentines attacked a Roman naval fleet that had entered their harbor. The Roman commander's flagship was defeated and sunk by "drunken" Greeks; five other Roman ships were sunk or captured also (Dion. Hal. 19.4, Dio fr.39.5, Zon. 8.2). This grievance soon led to L. Postumius Megellus' embassy to Tarentum (282/1), despatched to demand reparations for the diplomatic incident and otherwise to threaten appropriately violent responses. The city magistrates first rebuffed the ambassadors' desire to address the people (App. *Samn.* 7). Eventually, the authorities permitted the legates to speak in the theater—the regular venue for both comic drama and civic assembly. The Tarentines, amused [drunk again?] at the Romans' odd togas with their purple stripe, mocked their solecistic attempts to express themselves in Greek. Oblivious to looming danger, they called the Romans

<sup>57</sup> Dion. Hal. *Ant.Rom.* 20.4, Liv. *Per.* 11; cf. P. Willeumier, *Tarente des origines à la conquête romaine* (Paris 1939) 100–107.

“barbarians” and expelled them without providing satisfaction for their damages.

A boorish wag named Philonides, nicknamed Κοτόλη,<sup>58</sup> taunted the diplomatically sacrosanct Roman delegate Postumius. He bared his buttocks<sup>59</sup> and then reportedly defecated on the supposedly immune (ἱερᾶς) toga of the diplomat. His antics delight the light-hearted assembled citizens:<sup>60</sup> they laugh and clap as if at an entertainment. The outrageous acts<sup>61</sup> mimic stereotypical behaviors of drunkards in Phlyax dramas.<sup>62</sup> These buffoonish and often obscene dramas mocked heroic pretensions and pompous characters, as Philonides perhaps intended. Philonides is described as a “babbler,” σπερμολόγος, a term known from farce and comedy.<sup>63</sup> The burlesque quality of

<sup>58</sup> That is, “*Abuse-Lover*, nicknamed *Little Tanker-Man*,” one of several known Tarentine tell-tale names; cf. Wuilleumier, *Tarente* 175.

<sup>59</sup> Was this crude abuse, βωμολοχία, a visual pun on the anatomical “behind,” the Roman diplomat’s name? Cf. Latin *nates*, Greek νῶτος, and English “posterior.” Bilingual puns were common in antiquity.

<sup>60</sup> Granted the intensification of the outrage by the official “protected” nature of the diplomatic embassy, other excremental insults are known in the ancient city. Diogenes the Cynic urinated on interlocutors and spat in their faces (Diog. Laert. 6.46, 56, 32). The soldier Conon and his sons poured piss-pots and urinated on his fellow soldier Ariston’s servants (Dem. 54.4, τὰς ἀμίδας κατεσκεδάννυον καὶ προσεούρου). Old Comedy is full of such pre-emptive and retaliatory actions.

<sup>61</sup> *Gravissimas ibi iniurias*, Val. Max. 2.2.5, who specifies urination—more logical and likely.

<sup>62</sup> Christopher Barnes, “Inventing an Insult?” (American Philological Assoc. meeting of 1998), compared Polybius 1.6.5 (ἀσέλγεια) and Appian *Samm.* 7 on this incident. Appian describes this jokester as a comical character fond of hostile insults (ἀνὴρ γελοῖος καὶ φιλοσκώμων, 7.2); cf. Theophr. *Char.* 11.2, the “obnoxious man.” Wuilleumier, *Tarente* 104, already had reached the verdict describing the incident as an ancient *roman*: “l’analytique ... s’est plue à ... grossir cette scène tragi-comique, en opposant la dignité des Romains à l’orgueil licencieux des Grecs.” *Non liquet*, in the presence of Roman apologetics for their treaty violation.

<sup>63</sup> The name of the genre itself may refer to “talking nonsense,” φλύαρειν (so Hesychius; cf. Bieber, *History* 129). See e.g. Dem. 18.127, Ath. 85F, for the dismissive, faintly obscene term. Epicharmus of Syracuse(?) mentioned the granivorous, seed-picking jackdaw (Ath. 65B, 398D [*PCGr* I FF 42, 85])

the reportedly historical acts, however and unfortunately, cannot decide their historicity.

(6) The soiled Roman was dramatically humiliated in the Tarentine theater-assembly. Postumius<sup>64</sup> retorts in two ways to the Assembly's *hybris* or *contumelia*, the thrice repeated denigrating affront (ὑβρισμένην ἐσθῆτα, the Greeks τὴν ὑβριν ἐπαινοῦντων, the Romans ὑβρισθέντες). First, Postumius declared recognition of a wordless unintended omen: "We accept the omen" (δεχόμεθα τὸν οἰωνόν, Dion. Hal. 19.5.3). The divination-adept Roman magistrate publicly manipulated Philonides' name, "Insult-lover," and/or his secular insult. He rendered the disfavor a convenient, non-negotiable sacred sign favorable to himself. He then stated that the Tarentines were giving something that had not been requested (ὅτι καὶ τὰ μὴ αἰτούμενα δίδοτε ἡμῖν)<sup>65</sup>—an unintentionally ominous indication (by word or act) that foretells (and justifies) Roman retaliation against impiety and unprovoked aggression. Roman polite

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before we find it in Aristophanes (*Av.* 232, 579) and Alexis of Thuri(?) in South Italy (Ath. 344C [*PCGr* II T 12]). Both Rhinthon and Sciras, two of the few known authors of so-called Phlyakes, usually South Italian comic skits, are reported in late sources (perhaps more for their works' content than from biographical data) as Tarentines (*PCGr* I Rhinton TT 1–2, Sciras T 1). Dionysius, in the extant portions of his lengthy history of Republican Rome, employs this word only three times, all to describe ill-mannered Tarentines (19.4.2, 5.2, 5.3). This probably reflects a source who shared the anti-hedonistic prejudices against the loose-living, luxury-loving city. The scurrilous word rarely occurs in Hellenic literature of any period (ninety "hits" altogether in the TLG), aside from its respectable and descriptive avian contexts and Christian commentators on Acts 17:18 (a view of Paul). See, however, the comments of Eustathius explaining *Odyssey* 1.233.

<sup>64</sup> The patrician L. Postumius Megellus, cos. 305, 294, 291, was a colorful figure. His clansman descendant, Sp. Postumius Albinus, cos. 186, investigated the Bacchanalians, a fact perhaps suggesting that religious interests ran in the family (A. Eckstein per litt.).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. a similarly quick divinatory retort of the future Macedonian king Perdiccas (Hdt. 8.137.5): δεκόμεθα, ὦ βασιλεῦ, τὰ διδοῖς. The acceptance of the *kledon* clinches his succession. The Latin equivalent for Roman omen-grasping was *accipimus quod datur* (Val. Max. 1.5 ext. 2, the Apolloniaties).

words are destined to lead to excremental offense on the foe. Postumius thus translates the Tarentine “Insult-lover’s” excretory gesture of injury that he added to verbal insult: Just as your citizen rebuffs the Romans with an offensive refusal, so you must suffer humiliating military offense from the Romans. That is, shit-insults fall on you. One could always try to force a meaning on another’s casual utterance or act. Men might extort or seek fatal utterances or actions.<sup>66</sup>

Secondly, Postumius responds to his opponents’ laughter, visible endorsement of diplomatic outrage. “Laugh now while you can, because you will weep later,” and he prophesies (ἐπιθεσπίσαντες) grim retaliation: “You will wash clean my toga with much of your blood” (Dion. Hal. 19.5.4). They will pay for their excreted wine with tears and blood, not water, a heady collocation of human uses of symbolic liquids.

The Roman Senate, when apprised of the sacrosanct ambassador’s foul abasement by his report and their sight of the stinking cloak, a speaking object (Dion. Hal. 19.6.1, ὕβρεις ἄς ἦσαν ὑβρισμένοι), voted at once to declare war (Liv. *Per.* 12; Dion. Hal. 19.6); the people ratified this decision. The Tarentines voted to ally with Rome’s antagonist Pyrrhus. Meton, a local politician, now danced into a political assembly again summoned in the theater, dressed like a drunken reveller (19.8 ὥσπερ ἐκ συμποσίου, the *third* incident involving toppers) and accompanied by a flute-girl, as in a private *komos*. His rationale for the scene was to gain his countrymen’s amused attention. Having succeeded, he warned the people against alliance with Pyrrhus because that ruler—one way or another—would put a stop to their drinking bouts. He said, in a phrase clearly echoing Postumius’ threat, because the end of festivals was approaching: “Revel while you can” (παίξειν καὶ κωμάζειν ἕως ἔξοστι, Plut. *Pyrr.* 13.3–5, cf. Dion. Hal. 19.8). While Meton cautioned his countrymen in a third alcoholic *scène burlesque*,<sup>67</sup> L. Aemilius Barbula began to devastate their territory. After

<sup>66</sup> See Halliday, *Divination* 47, 229–230, on the biblical 1 Sam. 14:12.

<sup>67</sup> Wuilleumier, *Tarente* 105, aptly mentions a parallel earlier wise and warning advisor, also named Meton, an Athenian seer of 415 B.C. (Plut. *Nic.* 13). This fact favors suspicions of fabrication.

Pyrrhus decamped from Italy, the Romans besieged Tarentum and its citadel, and eventually captured them (272 B.C.). Penalties, as prophetically predicted, amounted to “more” than the original compensation demanded: accept a garrison, give hostages, pay tribute, and, finally, lose the Tarentine colony Heracleia and their general South Italian hegemony.<sup>68</sup>

### *Conclusions*

We have detailed an ancient diplomatic technique, reflected in a rare *topos* in ancient historiography: the “useful” omen (usually verbal) identified as heaven-sent by an angry or anxious authority figure. A usually Spartan (4) or Roman (2) diplomat, official, or king employs a seemingly chance occurrence that endorses his intention and enables him to pursue his chosen policy. The event opens a new campaign and indeed justifies it. A façade of piety conceals personal anger and community aggression. The standard phrasing and rhythm of Herodotus 9.91<sup>69</sup> reappear in the text of Dionysius *Ant.Rom.* 19.5:<sup>70</sup> δέκομαι τὸν οἰωνόν, ᾧ Σάμιε ξεῖνε, finds echo in δεξόμεθα [δεχόμεθα Sylburg] τὸν οἰωνόν, ᾧ σπερμολόγε.<sup>71</sup> These

<sup>68</sup> Dion. Hal. 19.7–8; Willeumier, *Tarente* 133–141.

<sup>69</sup> Comparable Herodotean language in acceptances of ambiguous blessings elsewhere: Peisistratus (1.63), Perdiccas (8.137.5). Relevant Latin examples of the acceptance of verbal omens include Liv. 1.7, 5.55, 9.14.8, 29.27.12; Verg. *Aen.* 2.178, 190, 5.530, Val. Max. 1.5 (Halliday, *Divination* 46ff.).

<sup>70</sup> As the Augustan author admired his Classical countryman (*Thuc.* 5), Dionysius’ description of an omen-affected diplomatic incident at Tarentum may intentionally resemble his predecessor’s ominous diplomatic confrontations at Aegina and Delos. A. Momigliano, “The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography,” *Studies in Historiography* (New York 1966) 127–142, observes that Dionysius was the only ancient historian never to criticize Herodotus. Felton, *Phoenix* 52 (1998) 45–48, discusses an indubitable parallel, previously noted, between the Halicarnassian historians, which Dionysius himself makes explicit. The exiled tyrant Tarquin’s advice to his tyrant son Sextus imitates the tyrant Thrasybulus’ agriculturally coded nonverbal advice to his tyrannical colleague Periander: decapitate noble competitors (Hdt. 5.92ζ, Dion. Hal. 4.56).

<sup>71</sup> The unintendedly ominous signs may differ, in that the Herodotean and Ciceronian examples are nakedly naming *omina* (*nomen atque omen*: Plaut.

parallel sequences transcend extemporaneous humor. They embody a religious and diplomatic ploy—a religious formulaic activity practicable in international affairs. The wit is divinatory skill and not just banal “wise-guy” retorting.

To call *oionos/kledon* or *omen* on someone is, at the least, to “work a psychological *ju-jitsu*” (A. Eckstein per litt.). This was a technique of responsive public aggression to foes on Aegina and at Tarentum; at Delos calling *kledon* among allies preempted possibly divisive public discussion. “Normal” supernatural omens emanate from the gods, ready or not, often at oracular shrines. Although one can prepare oneself to inquire and approach them to receive a response, and even return for a second try (Hdt. 7.141), one cannot conveniently choose the words—as with *kledones*.

The already divided and disputing Athenians analyzing the “wooden walls” of the Delphic response (an oracle, privileged ominous speech), could “spin” the answer (Hdt. 7.142–143) but not change the fatal words. Interpretation is already a type of human interference, but *kledon* or other accidental omen recognition offers humans more control. “I accept the surprise omen” means “I turn this accident into an omen in my favor.” Such human attempts occur every day, but historians can only read about successful interventions and then only after the event. Divine-human currents flow both ways (e.g., portents and prayers). Believers might say that the gods admire human ingenuity, that the gods enjoy the human transformation of accidents into omens, making them confirm one’s cause for the omen-caller and his allies. In the examples examined here, from the *Odyssey* on, quick-witted responses make things happen. The prophet should direct the future, not merely foretell it, Agamemnon complained about Calchas.<sup>72</sup> Ancient leaders took advantage of chance information, acts, or human ex-

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*Pers.* 625), while the Dionysian may be verbal by implication or an “action omen”—or both. The Tarentine example has Postumius twist the interpretation of the insulter’s name or low insult into a favorable omen in order to save Roman pride and to determine the gods’ actions.

<sup>72</sup> *Il.* 1.108; quoted by Halliday, *Divination* 53.

pressions intended otherwise, to direct the future, to further their interests.<sup>73</sup>

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