Revisiting the question of etymology and essence

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Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone
Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins
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For example:

Revisiting the question of etymology and essence

June 2, 2016  By Gregory Nagy  listed under By Gregory Nagy

When I say etymology here, I mean the procedure of reconstructing a form by way of linguistics. This procedure is expected to start from a current phase of the given form and then to move back in time to an earlier phase—ideally, all the way back to the earliest phase. In terms of the etymology of the word etymology, what linguists hope to recover by way of such reconstruction is the 'genuine meaning', which is how I translate the ancient Greek words étumos and lógos—and which is what I mean when I say essence in the title here. In what follows, I face the question of "etymology and essence." And, at the end, I offer comments relevant to various different etymologies proposed for the name of Helen, who as I mentioned in my posting for 2016.05.02 seems to be a heroine in the Homeric Iliad even though she is worshipped as a goddess in places like Sparta. My concluding question, then, will be this: what is the etymology or étumos lógos 'genuine meaning' of the name of Helen, Greek Ἑλένη (Ἑλένη)?

§1. When I say etymology here, I mean the procedure of reconstructing a form by way of linguistics. This procedure is expected to start from a current phase of the given form and then to move back in time to an earlier phase—ideally, all the way back to the earliest phase. In terms of the etymology of the word étumos, what linguists hope to recover by way of such reconstruction is the 'genuine meaning', which is how I translate the ancient Greek words étumos and lógos—and which is what I mean when I say essence in the title here. I first used the wording "etymology and essence" in the title of an essay, Nagy 1994b, about etymologies proposed for the name of the god Apollo, and I will refer to the essay hereafter in its rewritten form, which is Chapter 6 of the same 2004 book Homer's Text and Language. Also relevant is another essay, Nagy 1994a, about etymologies proposed for the name of the hero Achilles; in this case as well, I will refer to the essay in its rewritten form, which is Chapter 6 of the same 2004 book Homer's Text and Language. In what follows, I face the question of "etymology and essence." And, at the end, I offer comments relevant to various different etymologies proposed for the name of Helen, who as I mentioned in my posting for 2016.05.02 seems to be a heroine in the Homeric Iliad even though she is worshipped as a goddess in places like Sparta.

§2. When we consider the surviving ancient contexts of the Greek word étumologíā, which means literally 'reasoning about the genuine meaning', we see at least a partial convergence with modern contexts of the borrowed word etymology. Already in the ancient world, the search to discover the etymology of a given word was a search to discover its 'genuine' or 'real' meaning, which would be supposedly the basic or even original meaning. I cite here just one example, taken from an essay by the physician Galen, who flourished in the second century CE: in this essay, On shoulder-dislocation in ways not seen by Hippocrates (18a p. 359.6–8 ed. Kühn), Galen actually uses the word étumologíā (ἐτυμολογία) in a context where he offers an etymology for the Homeric adjective mōνukhās (μόνυχας) in the accusative plural, meaning 'with single hooves', that is, 'with hooves that are unclenched', describing the accusative plural noun ἵππους 'horses' (Iliad 5.236 and so on). Horses have unclenched hooves as opposed to cattle, which of course have hooves that are cloven. According to the etymology offered by Galen, the word mōνukh- here was originally a combination of mono- meaning 'single' with onukh- meaning 'hoof'. In this case, as it happens, there seems to be no real convergence between such an ancient etymology and the current modern etymology, since
§3. When Galen offers his superannuated etymologiā for this Homeric word móukhas, he uses the word onoma in referring to the given ‘word’ (μόνυχας . . . τού όνοματος, ὡς φασίν οἱ τῶν ἑτυμολογίας τιμῶντες: 18α p. 359.7 ed. Kühn). But how do we relate this meaning ‘word’ to the more basic meaning of onoma, which is of course ‘name’? Or, to ask the question in a different way, how is a ‘name’ the same thing as a ‘word’ in the context of an etymology? For an answer, I start by citing a historical fact, as pointed out by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, whose lifetime straddled the first century BCE and the first century CE: in his essay The Arrangement of Words (16), Dionysius mentions in passing that the model text for the methodology of etymologiā as he understands it is the Cratylius of Plato. And here I add a related fact: both in the Cratylius (383a and so on) and elsewhere as well in contexts having to do with the etymologies of words, the conventional word for ‘word’ is onoma.

§4. This Greek word onoma, used by Plato in a specialized sense to mean ‘word’ in contexts of etymological speculation, became specialized also in a different sense: onoma was used with the special meaning ‘noun’ in the discourse of ancient grammarians, and even Plato himself occasionally used this word onoma in the sense of ‘noun’ (as in Sophist 262a–b). To be more precise: ancient grammarians conventionally spoke of two kinds of noun, as we read in the Technique of Grammar (1.1.24.2–5) by Dionysius of Thrace, second/first century BCE: an onoma or ‘noun’ may be koïnon ‘common’, such as anthropos ‘human’, or it may be idion ‘proper’, such as Sökratēs ‘Socrates’. Another such formulation is attested in the Syntax (2.2.142.1) of Apollonius Dyscolus, second century CE.

§5. Grammarians today can continue to make such basic distinctions between common and proper nouns: common nouns are simply nouns while proper nouns are nouns that are also names. But the original Greek distinction between koïnon ‘common’ and idion ‘proper’ highlights a major problem in studying the etymologies of nouns—and even of words in general. The problem has to do with the coexistence of generalized and specialized modes of reference by way of onomata in the sense of ‘words’. I start with nouns: yes, proper nouns are nouns that are specialized for use as names, but are names really the only proper nouns? I argue that nouns other than names can also be proper nouns within the kind of specialized traditional language that is used in myth and ritual. I further argue that verbs too—and for that matter all other parts of speech—can likewise have a special use that is proper to the same specialized kind of language that is used in myth and ritual. To put it another way, the world of myth and ritual has its own proper language, to be contrasted with the world of everyday life, which has a common language.

§6. Viewed in this light, the problem we have with the coexistence of generalized and specialized modes of reference by way of onomata in the sense of ‘words’ is no longer a problem when it comes to studying the etymologies of words. And I mean here the scientific study of etymologies in terms of modern linguistics, not in terms of superannuated theorizings about etymologies in the ancient world. Even in terms of modern linguistics, the ‘real meaning’ or etymology of a word may be seen as specialized in the traditional world of myth and ritual while it is more generalized in the less traditional world of everyday life. And different meanings, specialized or general, can coexist within any given language that has developed within its own linguistic framework a specialized language that is used in contexts of myth and ritual. In the everyday world, a given word can show a generalized mode while that same word can show its specialized mode in the world of myth and ritual.

§7. Returning to the distinction between a proper noun and a common noun, I now propose instead a different level of distinction. That is, I propose to make a distinction between a proper language that is used for myth and ritual and a common language for everyday use. In terms of such a deeper-level distinction, all nouns are really ‘proper’ in the world of myth and ritual while all nouns—even names—can become common in everyday life.

§8. With regard to the idea that even a name can become a common noun, I will choose as my primary example the noun Sökratēs meaning ‘Socrates’. As I will now argue, even this proper noun can be seen as a common noun. Granted, the noun Sökratēs is ‘proper’, idion, to the human whom we in the modern world all recognize as Socrates, that is, the human whose essence was Socrates. And yes, only this human could have had that essence: this Socrates was one single person in the history of the world—from the subjective standpoint of that one single person and of Plato and all the other persons who knew Socrates. But what about all the other Socrateses of the world? To take a random illustration, I cite Socrates of Pellene, winner of a boys’ footrace at the Olympics. He is mentioned by Pausanias (6.8.1), an author who lived in the second century CE and who saw an inscribed statue of this boy at Olympia. Pausanias mentions this other Socrates only in passing, adding that the sculptor of the statue representing this Socrates was unknown. And that is all we know about this other Socrates. For us a common noun might have been adequate for referring to this person by the name of Socrates. This Socrates might as well be, in the eyes of world history, simply ‘some boy’, or, somewhat more generally, just another anthropōs or ‘human’.

§9. The same author Pausanias who tells us about this other Socrates (6.8.1) happens to mention also the world-famous Socrates son of Sophronis—though in an entirely different context (1.22.8; there is also a related context at 9.35.7). This context shows Pausanias at the moment of entering the gateway of the Acropolis of Athens, and he sees there with his own eyes the statues of the three Kharites ‘Graces’ that Socrates son of Sophronis is reported to have sculpted with his own hands. So, from some random details that we see being mentioned in different contexts by Pausanias, we happen to see two references to the art of sculpting. But what does this convergence of references have to say about the name of Socrates?
the philosopher—or even about the name of Socrates the boy athlete? The obvious answer is: absolutely nothing.

§10. In the world of modernity, we have learned to expect this sort of thing. The names of persons that we trace in world history have little or nothing to do with the roles of these persons in the context of their actual history. A proper noun like Sókratēs, the etymology of which indicates a meaning such as ‘he whose winning-power [kratōs] is salvific [sō­-]’, has a meaning that cannot be expected to match the meaning, if there is one, of the life of any person named Socrates. The life of any Socrates, whether it is the famous philosopher or merely the nearly-unknown boy athlete, is shaped primarily by the contingencies of history, not by the name Socrates. A person may be given a name that is hopefully meant to shape that person’s identity, but such a hoped-for identity is inevitably reshaped by the realities of life. Even if a name has a meaning, such as ‘he whose winning-power [kratōs] is salvific [sō­-]’ in the case of persons named Socrates, such a meaning cannot be expected to have a role in defining the essence of the referent in an everyday world.

§11. Things are different, however, in the world of myth and ritual. The name of a person who figures in such a world can be expected to be a part of a system, and this system is the traditional world of myth and ritual. In the language of myth and ritual as we see it at work in the poetry of the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey, for example, the grammar is so specialized as to be proper to a cosmos that operates in terms of myth and ritual, not in terms of everyday life. Whereas even proper nouns may be treated as common nouns in everyday language, the situation is reversed in the specialized language of myth and ritual. In this specialized language, proper nouns are consistently proper nouns and even common nouns can be treated as proper nouns. Even more than that, any part-of-speech in the language of myth and ritual can become a ‘proper’ part-of-speech.

§12. That is what I argued at length in my essay on the name of Achilles, Nagy 1994a, where I used such technical terms as (a) Dichtersprache or (b) poetic language or (c) formulaic diction in referring to the system at work in the poetry of the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey. I started with Akhilioûs, the proper noun that functions as the name of Achilles in Homeric poetry. This name Akhilioûs, which I reconstruct etymologically as a compound noun shaped *akhi­-lāós and meaning ’whose mass-of-[fellow­-]warriors [lāós] has grief [ákhos],’ exists within the system of formulaic diction that we know as Homeric poetry. And the use of this compound noun within the formulaic system of Homeric poetry is coexistent with the corresponding use of the uncompounded nouns lāós ’mass-of-[fellow­-]warriors’ and ákhos ’grief’ within the same system of formulaic diction. All three nouns—Akhilioûs, ákhos, lāós—operate together and interact with each other inside the cosmos of this poetic system. Also operating together and interacting with these three nouns are three other nouns: Akhaiōi, kratōs, mēnis. The first of these, Akhaiōi or ‘Achaeans’, is the primary name in the Iliad for the lāós or ’mass-of-warriors’ who start losing the Trojan War after Achilles directs his mēnis ‘anger’ against them. The second, kratōs, refers to the ’winning-power’ of the winning side of a war. And the third, mēnis, is the superhuman anger of Achilles against his fellow-warriors for having failed to give him the honor that was his due.

§13. I now offer a simplified analysis of formulaic interactions involving all six of these nouns in the Homeric Iliad (I give a more detailed version of this analysis in Nagy 1994a|2004 6§16):

Insulted by Agamemnon, Achilles experiences ákhos ’grief’, which leads to the mēnis ‘anger’ he feels toward his fellow-warriors for failing to defend his honor. This anger in turn leads to the ákhos ’grief’ of these fellow-warriors, whose name is primarily Akhaiōi ‘Achaeans’ in the Iliad—and who now start losing the Trojan War. So the ákhos ’grief’ of the Achaeans signals a reversal in the war. But once Achilles unsays his mēnis, which happens much later, after so many deaths in the war—and only after the hero’s other self Patrokllos is tragically killed in battle—a second reversal can happen in the Trojan War: now the Achaeans can start winning again while the Trojans start losing. In the formulaic system of Homeric poetry, the ákhos ’grief’ experienced by the Achaeans is the converse of kratōs, which is ’winning-power’. In general, warriors who fight in the Iliad are said to be having kratōs ’winning-power’ when they win and ákhos ’grief’ when they lose. The meaning of kratōs ’winning-power’ is driven by a zero-sum mentality: the very fact that one of two contending sides in war gets kratōs necessitates that this side is thereby the winner and the other side, the loser. Such a semantic symmetry between the forms kratōs and ákhos as nouns embedded in the formulaic system of Homeric diction is mirrored by the morphological symmetry of the forms Akhaiōi and krataiōi as adjectives that are likewise embedded, and the very name that is given in the Iliad to the lāós ’mass-of-[fellow­-]warriors’, Akhaiōi, functions as a derivative of ákhos—within the semantic framework of the formulaic language. Corresponding to the function of the form Akhaiōi as a marker of situations where the Achaeans are destined to die in war, we can see the function of the form krataiōi as an adjective applied to molra ‘destiny’ in situations that mark the impending death of a warrior in battle, as at Iliad 16.854, where the molra krataiōi of a warrior’s death is said to await Hector, and at Iliad 19.410, where it is said to await Achilles himself.

§14. In terms of these interactions, I have in effect restated the overall plot of the Iliad. It is a plot that Aristotle would have described as the mūthos of this epic—and what I now describe as the logic of the myth. And this logic of myth, this etymologiā, corresponds to the etymologies of the six words that I have analyzed in the context of their interactions with each other inside the formulaic system of Homeric poetry—a system that I continue to describe as the language of myth and ritual.
§15. As I near the end of this essay, I must emphasize that there is of course no single language of myth and ritual in the history of Greek civilization. The language of Homeric poetry is only one such language. Yes, this is the most prominent example of its kind, but the fact remains that there also survive other specialized languages expressing different though comparable myths and rituals that stemmed from different though comparable historical contexts of ancient Greek civilization. And we can expect that the etymologies connected with such different special languages will be different from—though again comparable to—the etymologies connected with the language of Homeric poetry.

§16. Looking back at the six words that I analyzed etymologically a minute ago, I cite here just one example of existing differences in the specialized languages of myth and ritual. My example centers on the use of the form Akhaiā in the historical context of myths and rituals having to do with the goddess Demeter (Plutarch On Isis and Osiris 378d–e). Like the proper noun Akhaiōn in the context of the hero Achilles, the proper noun Akhaiā in the context of the goddess Demeter refers to a situation where a community is afflicted with akhos ‘grief’ caused by a superhuman form of mènis ‘anger’ that is correlated with a cosmic sanction. In the case of Demeter, the community is pictured as all of humanity, afflicted with the akhos ‘grief of suffering a cessation of all vegetation—to be contrasted with the case of Achilles, where the lāos or ‘mass-of-warriors’ is a subset of humanity, afflicted with the akhos ‘grief of suffering reversals of fortune in war. In my book The Best of the Achaean, I offer a detailed linguistic argumentation for an overall etymology of Akhaiōs/Akhaiā as derived from akhos ‘grief’, a most powerful word that signals not only reversals of fortune but also the singing of laments occasioned by such reversals. And, in my posting for 2015.07.22 in Classical Inquiries, I offer an updating, where I finally take into account the relevance of the the Hittite term Ahhīyawa to the Greek form Akhaiā.

§17. In sum, the essence of Achilles is defined by a poetic cosmos, and the etymology of his name refers to such an essence. As a hero in Homeric poetry, Achilles has an identity that is consistent with the system of myth and ritual in which he exists, unlike the identities of historical figures whose life-stories are subjected to the inconsistencies of real life, which are the unpredictable contingencies of history. The wishful thinking of historical figures is that they too will live out a life that is predictable in the language of myth and ritual. And that is why, in their wishful thinking, they pray to the god Apollo, since he can predict all, promise all, even if he insists on doing so in his own opaque ways. That is what his name means, as I argue in the essay that I mentioned at the beginning (Nagy 1994a). In other words, the etymology of Apollo is his essence as the god of promise. But that is another story.

§18. Here I end by returning to a question I asked at the beginning: what is the etymology or etumos logos ‘genuine meaning’ of the name of Helen, Greek Helēnē (Ἑλένη)? According to Guy Smoot in his posting for Classical Inquiries 2016.05.03, there is no single etymology that could be accepted as the absolute ‘genuine meaning’ etumos logos. I would add, the surviving ancient Greek myths and rituals centering on Helen are markedly different: there existed many different special languages about Helen, and these differences were reflected in mutually contradictory versions that survived well into the classical period of Greek literature and art. So, we see no single etymology here, no single absolute ‘genuine meaning’ or etumos logos. In other words, the etymology of Helen is a multiplicity of etymologies. Relevant to such a multiple “etymology,” I argue, is the paradoxical denial of an etumos logos ‘genuine meaning’ for Helen in the words of a recantation by the lyric poet Stesichorus, as quoted in Plato’s Phaedrus (243a):

οὐκ ἐστ’ ἐτυμὸς λόγος ὁπότως | οὐδὲ ἔβας ἐν νημαίν ἐσφαλμός | οὐδὲ ἴκει Πέργαμο Τροίας.

Not real [etumos] is this meaning—by-way-of- wording [logos]. | No, you did not set foot on the decks of the fleet of ships, | and no, you did not come to the citadel of Troy.

Stesichorus Poetae Melici Graeci (ed. Page) number 193

§19. Here we see a “lyric” version of the Helen myth contradicting an “epic” version that we know primarily on the basis of the Homeric Iliad. In the epic version, Helen did in fact set foot on the deck of the ship that took her ultimately to Troy together with Alexander/Paris as her paramour. In the lyric version as mediated by the recantation of Stesichorus, on the other hand, the facts are different because the essence of Helen is now different—and therefore the etymology can also be different. For now, however I will defer any further comment on these etymologies. Instead, I close by agreeing with Guy Smoot when he argues that multiple identities of any referent in myth and ritual can call for multiple etymologies. From an anthropological as well as linguistic point of view, the different versions of the Helen myth can all be true to the different specialized languages of myth and ritual from which they originated.

Bibliography


DELG. See Chantraine 2009.


Odysseus and Kingship: Commentary on Odyssey 8.166–177

Trying to read the Will of Zeus


Notes

[1] Chantraine DELG under the entry μῶνυς.

Tags: Achilles, etymology, Helen, Iliad, myth, ritual

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