"Gods cannot tell lies" riddling and ancient Greek divination

Naerebout, F.G.; Beerden, K.; Kwapisz, J.; Petrain, D.; Szymanski, M.

THE MUSE AT PLAY

RIDDLES AND WORDPLAY
IN GREEK AND LATIN POETRY

EDITED BY
JAN KWAPISZ
DAVID PETRAIN
MIKOŁAJ SZYMAŃSKI

DE GRUYTER

rizio

guage of Herodotus. In: E. J. Bakker et al.
eiden: Brill.
ient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts.

In: J.-P. Vernant, Immortals and Mortals:
niversity Press, 303–317.

"Gods Cannot Tell Lies":
Riddling and Ancient Greek Divination[*]

Frederick G. Naerebout & Kim Beerden

1. Introduction

Plato, in the *Apology*, presents Socrates as wondering about the pronouncement of the Delphic oracle that "no man is wiser than Socrates".[1] This must be a true pronouncement, because it is against the nature of the gods to tell lies. Thus Socrates supposes it to be a riddle, for he himself knows that he is not wise at all. He starts looking for someone wiser than himself in order to confront the god and learn what the hidden message of the oracle could be. The outcome of his quest is that the pronouncement is no riddle at all: it is the plain truth, for only Socrates is fully aware of what he does not know. This makes him the wisest of all men after all.

Socrates' supposition – or rather Plato's fictive version of it[2] – is that gods cannot tell lies, but can be expected to hide the true meaning of their words by αἰνίττεσθαι: speaking dark language, or riddling words. When we look at modern discussions of the riddle in the Greek world, it appears that constant reference is being made to Socrates, to the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx, and to a series of famous examples from Greek divination – oracular pronouncements.[3] This is somewhat odd: the interest seems to focus on what we would call the atypical, but what others see as central to

---

[1] Pl. *Ap.* 20e–21b.
[2] Montuori (1990) argues persuasively for a complete fabrication by Plato.
[3] For the sphinx, see Baum-vom Felde 2006 and Katz 2006, both with extensive references. For a famous analysis of the meaning and function of the riddle in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Vernant 1978. See also, more recently, Rokem 1996. Note that ancient sources describe the riddles of the Sphinx as oracular: see Segal 1999: 237–238 for a brilliant analysis.

the ancient concept of riddling. One of the reasons they see it that way is because the enigmatic oracle is seen as the original form of riddling, while riddling as a pastime is then supposed to be a later development.[4] But in fact, the majority of riddles documented in our sources do not belong in the realm of religion and myth; still, these "typical riddles", i.e. riddles from a non-religious context, have received rather less attention.[5] This balance ought to be redressed. But in order to be able to do so, we should first confront what we have called the atypical riddles head-on, and see what we can make of them. Here we again have to restrict ourselves, and we will look at oracular pronouncements only. A single representative example should suffice to illustrate the common viewpoint: "The responses of Greek oracles are often formulated in enigmatical language and use standard techniques of riddles (metaphors and symbols, paradoxes and *adynata*, ambiguous or polysemous words etc.) in order to conceal their true meaning and mislead the recipient; thus, the oracular response functions as a 'divine riddle' propounded by the god to a mortal".[6] There are definitely some preconceptions at work here that need looking into.[7] Exactly how often are oracular responses riddling and could they really be intended to mislead?

As riddles are at the core of our investigation, we should first of all establish what we understand by the word "riddle".[8] A simple, but workable definition of the riddle is the following: "a question or statement intention-

---

4   Edwards – Wright – Browning 1970, in speaking of the history of *riddles*, not of oracles: "the Oracle, for example, is typically expressed in enigmatic form" (implied is that the primordial riddle is oracular). Ziegler 1975, again on riddles: "Am Anfang steht im griechischen Mythos das Rätsel der Sphinx". Colli 1977: 437: "la derivazione dell'enigma dalla sfera della divinazione". This reflects ancient speculative thought: Paus. 8.8.3, tr. Jones 1933: "In the days of old those Greeks who were considered wise spoke their sayings not straight out but in riddles" (as was said about Orpheus, Heraclitus and many others).

5   The most relevant literature is almost a century old: Ohlert 1912, Schultz 1909; 1914. A recent contribution: Jedrkiewicz 1997: 40–48.

6   Konstantakos 2004: 130–131.

7   The association of oracles and riddles is engrained in modern language use: in Dutch "orakelspreuk" has come to mean "riddle", "orakeltaal" is "dark language", "orakelen", like German "orakeln", is "to speak darkly or ambiguously", in German "das war ein Orakel für mich" means "that was a mystery to me". This usage is rare in English, and absent in French and Italian. It is present, however, in modern Greek. The reception of the "riddling oracle" is a subject that should be addressed in detail.

8   On the need for proper etic definitions: Snoek 1987: 5. By concentrating on the riddle, we also want to pay homage to Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (1595–1640), Polish Jesuit, Neo-Latin poet and author of the treatise *De acuto et arguto*, which is in part devoted to investigating the literary device of the *acutum*, the "conceit".

f the reasons they see it that way is
 the original form of riddling, while
 to be a later development.[4] But in
 in our sources do not belong in the
"typical riddles", i.e. riddles from a
 rather less attention.[5] This balance
 be able to do so, we should first con-
al riddles head-on, and see what we
ve to restrict ourselves, and we will
y. A single representative example
mon viewpoint: "The responses of
 enigmatical language and use stand-
and symbols, paradoxes and *adynata*,
) in order to conceal their true mean-
 the oracular response functions as a
d to a mortal".[6] There are definitely
hat need looking into.[7] Exactly how
 and could they really be intended to

nvestigation, we should first of all es-
ord "riddle".[8] A simple, but workable
ng: "a question or statement intention-

ally phrased to require ingenuity in ascertaining its answer or meaning".[9] Ambiguity is inherent in the riddle, but the riddle is something more than an ambiguous pronouncement. The riddle is one particular linguistic way of expressing ambiguity: "inherent in the riddle is a deliberate ambiguity which is designed to reveal and conceal its subject at one and the same time. Success in untangling the true meaning of the riddle-sentence from the knots of verbal deceit depends upon the confirmation of the solution by the riddle poser".[10] A true riddle consists basically of a description ("it ploughs") and what linguists call a "block element" ("but leaves no furrow"); from this the referent has to be puzzled out (in this example: "a ship"). There are many variants, but in order for a statement to be considered a riddle there has to be a replacement of some kind, that is, the statement in the riddle is metaphoric – but the metaphor is deliberately left incomplete, with an element concealed, or it is contradictory.[11]

There is much more to be said about riddles, but the one thing it would be useful in the present context to add to the above, is that riddles, although of course they can be written down or even composed in writing, are essentially an *oral* form of wordplay.[12] We would rather not speak of orality in

---

in speaking of the history of *riddles*, not of
typically expressed in enigmatic form" (im-
racular). Ziegler 1975, again on riddles: "Am
das Rätsel der Sphinx". Colli 1977: 437: "la
 della divinazione". This reflects ancient
ones 1933: "In the days of old those Greeks
ir sayings not straight out but in riddles" (as
d many others).
t a century old: Ohlert 1912, Schultz 1909;
vicz 1997: 40–48.

les is engrained in modern language use: in
ean "riddle", "orakeltaal" is "dark language",
is "to speak darkly or ambiguously", in Ger-
means "that was a mystery to me". This usage
ch and Italian. It is present, however, in mod-
ddling oracle" is a subject that should be ad-

ions: Snoek 1987: 5. By concentrating on the
 to Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (1595–1640),
uthor of the treatise *De acuto et arguto*, which
 literary device of the *acutum*, the "conceit".

9   *Oxford English Dictionary* online s.v. "riddle" (July 2012). Cf. Augarde 2003: 1: "A question or statement that requires ingenuity to understand and answer, usually because it is phrased in an ambiguous or misleading way". In fields of study as varied as Psychology and Folklore Studies, scholars have produced countless definitions of the riddle. They tend to stress different aspects, but not always in helpful ways: "an overt question with a covert answer" (but riddles need not be questions), or "The riddle is a problem whose solution evokes a good deal of pleasure and humor" (but riddling is not always and never only fun: it can be a highly serious form of play), and so on. For these definitions, see G. B. Milner ap. Maranda 1976, Layton 1976: 239, and Shultz 1974: 100.

10   Ben-Amos 1976: 249. "By the riddle poser": when we speak of "solving the riddle", it is the riddler and not the riddlee who provides the ultimate solution. The riddles of traditional oral culture are not problems to be analysed: see Hamnett 1967: 384 on those to whom a riddle has been posed: "they are more likely to be trying to recall a *known but forgotten* answer than to be genuinely attempting to tackle a new problem". Alternatively, the fun lies in coming up with an alternative answer: see Katz 2006: 184 (Katz' 2006 article has much worthwhile to offer on riddles and riddling in general; see also Thatcher 2000).

11   McDowell 1994; Hamnett 1967; Welsh 1993 (from where we took our examples). For typologies, see Konstantakos 2004: 120–133, or Abrahams and Dundes 1972: 131. A main variant amongst what are considered "true riddles", are punning riddles, based on some lexical or grammatical ambiguity ("what turns without moving?" Answer: "milk"). A very particular type of replacement is the homonymic oracle – frequently encountered in ancient sources: Pausanias and/or his spokespersons were very fond of them.

12   Ong 1982: 53: "the riddle belongs in the oral world". Wordplay has several so-called "conversational genres": jokes, riddles, and so on; see, e.g., the overview in

this context, but of oral tradition or oral culture (e.g. "the oral tradition of children"); one should compare the concepts of orature and oracy, introduced or re-defined by African scholars Pio Zirimu and Austin Bukenya.[13] It should not be concluded from the essentially oral nature of riddles that riddles in Greek literary texts are representative of oral culture because of being riddles (or because of their formal aspects, such as a metrical composition). The riddle in whatever form can be conceived of in writing – and might indeed be introduced into a written text to evoke the spoken word.[14] And in the same way in which an "oral riddle" may be not oral at all, an unambiguous pronouncement may be utterly oral.

The play element of "wordplay" has remained somewhat implicit in the above definition, but riddling definitely is a form of play. "The riddle is a form of guessing game that has been a part of the folklore of most cultures from ancient times".[15] Usually, riddling games or contests are part of structured social occasions – and (to avoid any misconceptions arising from the words "play" and "game") these can range from joyous to very serious occasions. The riddle is essentially "a serious exercise in cultural reflexivity", by which one can "measure the limits of culture".[16] Punning, riddling and so on and so forth, while universal amongst language users, are also highly culture-specific. If we want to truly understand a culture, we will have to acquire a high level of cultural competence – and that high level includes all kinds of wordplay.[17]

---

a classic study, Finnegan 1970. Luz (2010) discusses riddles in an excursus, as merely related to *technopaegnia*. The difference seems to lie in the essentially oral nature of the riddle – but Luz does not say so, nor does she discuss the uses of writing in the creation and reception of *technopaegnia*. Of course, the distinction between *technopaegnia* as defined by Luz and other kinds of wordplay is far from absolute.

13   See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2007, Kaboré 2007, Mwangi 2007. That these concepts are hardly encountered, let alone discussed, outside the sphere of (East) African literacy/orality studies, shows how regrettably small the general impact of African scholarship is.

14   Cf. n. 53 below.

15   *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Ultimate Reference Suite* (Chicago 2009) s.v. "riddle".

16   McDowell 1994: 3578, 3580. Play is used here in the sense in which it was used by Huizinga 1938.

17   Within the limited space allotted to this paper, when dealing with general issues, we tend to use large (and contentious) concepts. "Culture" is one of these; we are aware of the debate surrounding it, but think it can be retained as a valid way of speaking about historical (and present) realities: see Brumann 1999 (including comments), or Baldwin et al. 2006: xv: "The notion of culture is quickly gaining momentum both in scholarly explanation and in the everyday lives of people as a key aspect of explaining their social reality". Different: Gillison 2010. A good

al culture (e.g. "the oral tradition of
oncepts of orature and oracy, intro-
rs Pio Zirimu and Austin Bukenya.[13]
essentially oral nature of riddles that
esentative of oral culture because of
al aspects, such as a metrical compo-
an be conceived of in writing -- and
tten text to evoke the spoken word.[14]
ral riddle" may be not oral at all, an
utterly oral.

has remained somewhat implicit in
nitely is a form of play. "The riddle is
en a part of the folklore of most cul-
riddling games or contests are part of
o avoid any misconceptions arising
these can range from joyous to very
ntially "a serious exercise in cultural
sure the limits of culture".[16] Punning,
le universal amongst language users,
e want to truly understand a culture,
f cultural competence -- and that high
[17]

(2010) discusses riddles in an excursus, as
difference seems to lie in the essentially oral
not say so, nor does she discuss the uses of
of technopaegnia. Of course, the distinction
Luz and other kinds of wordplay is far from

ré 2007, Mwangi 2007. That these concepts
cussed, outside the sphere of (East) African
grettably small the general impact of African

imate Reference Suite (Chicago 2009) s.v.

used here in the sense in which it was used by

this paper, when dealing with general issues,
s) concepts. "Culture" is one of these; we are
but think it can be retained as a valid way of
ent) realities: see Brumann 1999 (including
xv: "The notion of culture is quickly gaining
ation and in the everyday lives of people as a
al reality". Different: Gillison 2010. A good

Whether the Greek oracular pronouncements that we are going to study here are always "true riddles" as defined above, can be doubted. But they are certainly riddles in the somewhat wider sense of expressions with a deliberate ambiguity resulting from metaphoric replacement. They have been called "riddles" in modern discussions of the Greek oracles, which finds a parallel in ancient Greek sources which speak of oracular language as *griphos* or *ainigma*, "riddle".[18] For brevity's sake, we will speak of "riddles" whenever an oracular pronouncement is ambiguous, without further specifications – which would not make any difference as far as our conclusions are concerned.

2. Riddling Oracles

At least according to the literary sources, the interpretation of supernatural signs could be given in the shape of a riddle – especially where oracles were concerned.[19] The most famous Greek example of a riddle as the outcome of a divinatory session at the oracle, can be found in Herodotus. Croesus, the king of the Lydians, asked the Pythia at Delphi if he would reign over the Persians for a long time:

> To this the Pythian priestess answered as follows: "When the Medes have a mule as king, | Just then, tender-footed Lydian, by the stone-strewn Hermus | Flee and do not stay, and do not be ashamed to be a coward". When he heard these verses, Croesus was pleased with them above all, for he thought that a mule would never be king of the Medes instead of a man, and therefore that he and his posterity would never lose his empire.[20]

overview of this debate for the ancient world in Hall 2004: 35–50. For a basic, but sympathetic argument in favour of studying ancient "folklore" as a key to cultural history, see Ingemark and Ingemark 2007.

18 *Ainigma* and *griphos* are used mostly interchangeably. For attempts – ancient and modern – to differentiate between the two: Luz 2010: 144–145.

19 We see the oracular process as follows: some medium (the Pythia at Delphi, the tree at Dodona, etc.) functions as vehicle for the god to reveal his sign. This sign (which is always ambiguous in itself) is then converted into a message by an interpreter. It is this message that might be given the shape of a riddle. For some introductions to the topic (which do not necessarily agree with the way we see the process – there are other opinions on this), see Johnston 2005: 10, and Vernant 1974.

20 Hdt. 1.55.1–56.1, tr. Godley 1920: Ἡ δὲ Πυθίη οἱ χρᾷ τάδε· "Ἀλλ' ὅταν ἡμίονος βασιλεὺς Μήδοισι γένηται, | καὶ τότε, Λυδὲ ποδαβρέ, | πολυψήφιδα παρ' Ἕρμον | φεύγειν μηδὲ μένειν, μηδ' αἰδεῖσθαι κακὸς εἶναι". Τούτοισι ἐλθοῦσι τοῖσι ἔπεσι ὁ Κροῖσος πολλόν τι μάλιστα πάντων ἥσθη, ἐλπίζων ἡμίονον οὐδαμὰ ἀντ' ἀνδρὸς βασιλεύσειν Μήδων, οὐδ' ὦν αὐτὸς οὐδ' οἱ ἐξ αὐτοῦ παύσεσθαί κοτε τῆς ἀρχῆς.

Croesus was pleased with this *adynaton* – which is the way in which he interpreted it. Unfortunately, Croesus had not solved the riddle (in fact, he did not see it was a riddle at all: we will come back to that). His enemy, Cyrus – King of the Medes – was the child of a mother of high status while his father was of low status: a mule.[21] As this example shows, the product of a session at the Delphic oracle could, at least as portrayed in the literary sources, consist of a riddle that had to be solved by its recipient – life or death, the survival or destruction of a kingdom could all depend on the outcome. The story of Croesus is only one among a substantial number of literary accounts of the riddling nature of the product of the divinatory process.[22]

The first question to answer is how we should see these riddling oracles: were they oracular reality? There has been much debate whether these examples of divinatory riddles are a reflection of actual divinatory practice; as these are literary sources there is obviously room for such debate. Some of these reports are obviously narrative ploys, others are possibly authentic (in the sense of relating the actual answers of actual oracle sites to actual questions) – which can lead to at least three different conclusions. Two of these are common: the first is to pronounce some divinatory riddles authentic, and others not.[23] Of course, this can lead to endless discussions about the criteria for such judgements. The second is to maintain that even though it is impossible to say which story is authentic and which not, the stories still show us what Greek divinatory practice was like. Rather less common is the third conclusion: that these sources should be completely *rejected* as evidence for Greek divinatory practice.[24] In fact, there is a fourth approach: this says that the question is no good, and that whether

---

21 Hdt. 1.91.5.
22 For an overview, see Schultz 1909: 65–81.
23 Best known are Parke and Wormell's division of Delphic oracles in historic and fictive, and Fontenrose's division of the same in historic, quasi-historic, legendary and fictive (cf. nn. 45–46 below). The most sophisticated analysis of oracular responses is that by Aune (1983: 54–65). Flower (2008: 218) states as his "subjective opinion" that those oracles that "refer the problem back to the client" are the ones *most likely* to be historical.
24 Fontenrose (1978) gives proper (and generally ignored) arguments for considering as inauthentic all riddling oracles (and other oracles in the literary tradition). Otherwise, hardly anybody seems to go all the way. Rougemont (2005) is extremely critical of the whole idea of ambiguous oracular responses, but nevertheless wants to save some examples from the wreck ("la tradition antique est trop ancienne et trop unanime sur ce point pour être mensongère", p. 233; why this should be so escapes us). But see Pucci 1996: 152: "Nella vita pratica, invece, il vaticinio è fenomeno corrente, ubbidisce a varie esperienze ed esigenze di vita e si esprime *solitamente in modo chiaro*", italics ours.

...on – which is the way in which he
...had not solved the riddle (in fact, he
...will come back to that). His enemy,
...child of a mother of high status while
... As this example shows, the product
...d, at least as portrayed in the literary
...o be solved by its recipient – life or
...a kingdom could all depend on the
...y one among a substantial number of
...ure of the product of the divinatory

...ow we should see these riddling ora-
...e has been much debate whether these
...eflection of actual divinatory practice;
...bviously room for such debate. Some
...ve ploys, others are possibly authentic
...nswers of actual oracle sites to actual
...st three different conclusions. Two of
...ronounce some divinatory riddles au-
..., this can lead to endless discussions
...s. The second is to maintain that even
...story is authentic and which not, the
...vinatory practice was like. Rather less
...at these sources should be completely
...vinatory practice.[24] In fact, there is a
...question is no good, and that whether

any individual oracular pronouncement is authentic or not does not matter – the important thing is that this is how Greeks conceived their oracles.[25] Whether Greeks thought of their oracles as riddling is, as far as we are concerned, still an open question. When we want to know what actual oracular practice was, as the present authors do, we have to address that question.

Let us first look at the arguments of those who defend the historicity of the riddling oracles. The most usual way of explaining why the outcomes of divination should be ambiguous – this includes the riddles – is that it is a way for divination to continue to exist: if the interpretation of the signs given by the gods (which signs commonly are ambiguous in themselves) is ambiguous as well, the onus of "getting it right" is shifted to the individual or collective body receiving the message. If they misinterpret the riddle (or, more generally, are led astray by some ambiguous wording), in the end the supernatural is not to blame, nor is the oracle which gave out the oracular message. It is human error, at the recipients' end, and this is all there is to it. The reputation of god and of diviner is rescued. Robert Parker says that in this way "the client [is forced] to construct by interpretation his own response. ... Apollo referred the problem back to them" – at least, this is what happened in the case of "delicate enquiries".[26] However, reading Parker's analysis of oracles and politics, one comes upon several examples of fairly "delicate enquiries" that nevertheless called for, and got, straightforward answers. When Parker speaks of oracular pronouncements as "apparently objective and uniquely authoritative", delivering "reassurance" that one decides on the best course of action, "referral to binding arbitration", and "leading to a satisfactory dénouement", it seems self-contradictory to suppose that such pronouncements could be enigmatic.[27]

...5–81.
...'s division of Delphic oracles in historic and
...the same in historic, quasi-historic, legendary
...he most sophisticated analysis of oracular re-
...). Flower (2008: 218) states as his "subjective
...r the problem back to the client" are the ones

...generally ignored) arguments for considering
...nd other oracles in the literary tradition). Oth-
...o all the way. Rougemont (2005) is extremely
...ous oracular responses, but nevertheless wants
...eck ("la tradition antique est trop ancienne et
...mensongère", p. 233; why this should be so es-
...52: "Nella vita pratica, invece, il vaticinio è
...ie esperienze ed esigenze di vita e si esprime
...ours.

25 Struck 2003: 172; Flower 2008: 216; Rosenberger 2001: 12–13: "daher bleibt gleich, ob ein Orakelspruch – wie die meisten – *ex eventu* erfunden ist oder nicht. Wichtig ist vielmehr die Tatsache, dass er berichtet wird. Jede noch so durchsichtige Fiktion gewinnt einen hohen Wert, wenn man sich fragt, welche Botschaft sie transportieren soll". Rosenberger's refusal to single out our only extensive epigraphic corpus of oracular questions (and some responses), the *lamellae* from Dodona, seems hypercritical – the very fact that these are almost all questions, and not answers, let alone accounts of oracular success, seems to point towards their authenticity – in the above sense. Maurizo 1997 and also her contribution to this volume moves in a different direction to our approach because we still want to make this admittedly old-fashioned difference between *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, which is something that she deliberately chooses not to do.

26 Parker 2000: 80.

27 Parker 2000: 78. Despite this criticism, we want to stress that Parker's article is one of the most perceptive analyses of ancient divination and its functions.

The whole idea that an oracle would avoid giving a straightforward answer, and would leave things as open as possible, in order to reduce the chances of having it wrong, derives from a modern misconception that there exists some objective yardstick to measure divinatory success. Perhaps because we moderns have very particular ideas about what constitutes success, we do not see that oracles cannot in fact be "wrong", for the Greek oracle simply advises on "the best course of action".[28] If things turn out bad, they might very well have been worse if the alternative action had been taken. If something really is wrong, the interpreter has failed, because of lack of knowledge, or because of having been blinded by some all too human emotion, like greed or partisanship.[29] Consider a parallel: if an amulet does not protect one, its users will *not* conclude that the magic formula is ineffective – always allowing for exceptions – but they will say that the amulet and the magic did work after all, because otherwise things would have been worse, or they conclude that they indeed did not work, but not from any inherent ineffectiveness, but because one has done something wrong. There is no need to defend an oracle's reputation: its reputation cannot be damaged.

Another way of explaining the existence of riddling answers is to argue that the diviners did not so much want to save their skin, but simply acted in accordance with what they supposed to be the very nature of the gods. The gods were riddlers, and Apollo, the oracular god *par excellence*, was a riddler amongst riddlers. "Divine help could be valuable, but the gods often embedded it within problems; ... riddling oracles hid their meanings – and their potential usefulness – behind misleading words that tempted inept interpreters down fatal paths". The recipient should decode the message – the gods did not do this for you.[30] It is important, however, to stress that misinterpretations lead to tragedies, *not* because people are duped by the supernatural, but because people out of *hybris*, greed, jealousy, spite and whatever bad characteristic or emotion insist on coming up with the wrong solutions to the riddles placed before them.

This presence of ambiguity in divination seems, at first sight, to fit in with common ideas about religious life. Religion does not seem to belong primarily to a realm where maximum clarity of language is necessary or always appreciated. Religion deals in part with things that are impossible

---

28 Cf. nn. 60–61 below.

29 In literary sources, characters in the story can reject an oracle as false, as does Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex*; of course, the oracle is not false at all, but the protagonists cannot and want not to accept its consequences. If such stories tell one thing, it is that one should never think of an oracle as wrong.

30 Johnston 2008: 55–56.

ld avoid giving a straightforward an-
n as possible, in order to reduce the
from a modern misconception that
to measure divinatory success. Per-
articular ideas about what constitutes
nnot in fact be "wrong", for the Greek
ourse of action".[28] If things turn out
n worse if the alternative action had
ng, the interpreter has failed, because
having been blinded by some all too
isanship.[29] Consider a parallel: if an
will *not* conclude that the magic for-
ng for exceptions – but they will say
ork after all, because otherwise things
nclude that they indeed did not work,
eness, but because one has done some-
fend an oracle's reputation: its reputa-

xistence of riddling answers is to argue
ant to save their skin, but simply acted
sed to be the very nature of the gods.
the oracular god *par excellence*, was a
elp could be valuable, but the gods of-
riddling oracles hid their meanings –
nd misleading words that tempted inept
recipient should decode the message –
It is important, however, to stress that
, *not* because people are duped by the
ut of *hybris*, greed, jealousy, spite and
tion insist on coming up with the wrong
e them.
divination seems, at first sight, to fit in
life. Religion does not seem to belong
um clarity of language is necessary or
in part with things that are impossible

ne story can reject an oracle as false, as does
the oracle is not false at all, but the protagonists
onsequences. If such stories tell one thing, it is
racle as wrong.

or difficult to express in words; these might not be expressed at all (but instead put into imagery, or addressed non-verbally: acoustically or kinetically), but of course we also find a lot of metaphor, and all sorts of ambiguous and round-about ways of speaking about what is in the end unspeakable. The language of mysticism – in many different religious traditions – might be the ultimate example.[31] Giorgio Colli has set the tone here.[32] Giovanni Manetti (referring to Colli) discusses the divine sign as a challenge, obscure, unsolvable: the way Apollo shows his dark, destructive side.[33] The problem here is that no attempt is made to differentiate between the one religious behaviour and the other. Speaking about a god might be rather different from speaking to a god or being spoken to by a god.

Still another explanation is one based on arguments about Greek civic discourse, implying that an ambiguous answer is what the customers wanted to have in order to keep their own options open. Robert Parker explained that Greeks would have liked to get their oracles phrased in an ambiguous way: oracles were only asked in times of need when a decision could not be made easily. In these cases, oracles were only one of the arguments in these difficult decision-making processes and for the Greek *polis* to function properly, there would be a need for at least something to discuss. If the gods were loud and clear, assemblies or councils could not have functioned properly.[34] Croesus was, naturally, not dependent on such debate, but it can be argued that such stories were meant for a Greek audience: they say more about the needs of the audience than about those of Croesus. This can be seen to run into the same difficulties as the first argument: the notion of having maximum leeway to decide for oneself contradicts the notion of seeking for divine guidance in order to minimize uncertainty.

---

31 Still, much religious discourse is not more ambiguous than everyday language put to some purely practical purpose (which we tend to call unambiguous, even though quite some ambiguity is involved). This is something altogether different from inconsistency: see Versnel 1990: 1–35. Discourse in a religious context (as in many other contexts) need not be consistent, and is even likely to be inconsistent, inconsistency being a very common phenomenon.

32 Colli 1975: 61–69; 1977: 47–48, and the collection of passages, 339–369, with comments, 435–440.

33 Manetti 1987: 27–56; Jedrkiewicz 1997: 42–43: "Applicato alla sfera religiosa, esso svela le verità nascoste che incombono sull'essistenza; la scienza oracolare è un caso specifico di competenza enigmistica".

34 Parker 2000: 76, 80.

3. The Nature of Greek Divination

Let us explore the nature of ambiguity in the divinatory process in order to offer an alternative answer to the question whether or not riddles were actual oracular practice, and why this would be so. This oracular process started with the observation of a perceived sign from the supernatural by an individual. That sign had either been evoked by the individual, or he would have observed something per chance and judged it to be a sign. Seen from an emic perspective, this sign would always be ambiguous.[35] When Penelope had a dream in which she saw her twenty geese killed by an eagle, she considered this to be a sign: the dream was meaningful. But it needed interpretation in order to clarify its meaning.[36] The divinatory sign – in whichever shape, the rustling of leaves, the throw of a dice – is in itself meaningless. So someone has to pronounce the meaning of the sign. The same with the flight of birds, the missing lobe of a liver and so on: once an occurrence had been recognized as being a sign, that sign had to be interpreted, either by a layman or by a specialized diviner. The final pronouncement could, naturally, be a straightforward "positive" or "negative": the ideal situation for the recipient of the sign. Yet, it could theoretically also be a statement that was ambiguous, leaving room for different explanations. Such an ambiguous statement could possibly take the form of a riddle – which is of course what literary sources about oracles show us. To take up our previous example of a sign, Penelope's dream: the interpretation of that sign could be the arrival of an avenger who kills the suitors (straightforward) or "an eagle will come upon the geese and kill them all" (riddling – the same message encrypted in a simile). The recipient of the riddling interpretation would then still need – as a third step in the process – to resolve a riddle before he gained some kind of guidance about the future.

Are ambiguous pronouncements in the shape of riddles really typical of divination in general and oracles in particular? In order to formulate an answer to this question, we will compare the literary evidence with its oracular riddles to the epigraphical evidence. We will look at Delphi and

---

35 Only a direct spoken answer (spoken by the god or his mouthpiece) would be unambiguous: unless that answer was not in ordinary comprehensible language – in the case of the Pythia as mouthpiece of Apollo at Delphi, we are unsure of the shape of this oral sign. For a brief overview of opinions on these matters, see Rosenberger 2001: 54–58.

36 As in this case also happened within the course of her dream: see Hom. *Od.* 9.525–550.

Greek Divination

in the divinatory process in order to
estion whether or not riddles were
would be so. This oracular process
ved sign from the supernatural by an
voked by the individual, or he would
nd judged it to be a sign. Seen from
lways be ambiguous.[35] When Penel-
twenty geese killed by an eagle, she
m was meaningful. But it needed in-
eaning.[36] The divinatory sign – in
es, the throw of a dice – is in itself
ounce the meaning of the sign. The
ing lobe of a liver and so on: once an
eing a sign, that sign had to be inter-
specialized diviner. The final pro-
ightforward "positive" or "negative":
f the sign. Yet, it could theoretically
us, leaving room for different expla-
nt could possibly take the form of a
ry sources about oracles show us. To
gn, Penelope's dream: the interpreta-
l of an avenger who kills the suitors
me upon the geese and kill them all"
ted in a simile). The recipient of the
l need – as a third step in the process
ed some kind of guidance about the

in the shape of riddles really typical
n particular? In order to formulate an
mpare the literary evidence with its
evidence. We will look at Delphi and

Dodona – two oracle sites with an equal reputation for riddling – and at
Hellenistic oracles:

> By such dreams was I, to my distress, beset night after night, until at last I gained
> courage to tell my father of the dreams that haunted me. And he sent many a mes-
> senger to Pytho and Dodona so that he might discover what deed or word of his
> would find favor with the gods. But they returned with report of oracles, riddling,
> obscure, and darkly worded.[37]

This reputation of the oracle at Dodona for ambiguity and riddling is not
borne out by local practice. Striking epigraphic materials were found at
Dodona: many *lamellae*, small strips of lead containing questions to the
oracle, and in a few cases an answer from the oracle, on their reverse side.
Less than 200 of these texts have been published so far, and there are many
more (c. 1,100) that are still unpublished.[38] With a few exceptions, they
stem from the sixth century to around 250 BC.[39] An example of the type of
questioning is the following:

> Whether it will be better for me if I go to Sybaris and if I do these things?[40]

Esther Eidinow has recently compiled a catalogue of questions to the ora-
cle and she includes answers, in as far as these are extant. From those an-
swers included by Eidinow – she provides 15 in total – not one is clearly
ambiguous.[41] All are plain and simple and are comparable to the following
example in clarity:

---

37 Aesch. *PV* 655–662, tr. Weir Smyth 1922: τοιοῖσδε πάσας εὐφρόνας ὀνείρασι |
    ξυνειχόμην δύστηνος, ἔστε δὴ πατρὶ | ἔτλην γεγωνεῖν νυκτίφοιτ' ὀνείρατα· ὁ δ' ἔς
    τε Πυθὼ κἀπὶ Δωδώνην πυκνοὺς | θεοπρόπους ἴαλλεν, ὡς μάθοι τί χρὴ | δρῶντ' ἢ
    λέγοντα δαίμοσιν πράσσειν φίλα. | ἧκον δ' ἀναγγέλλοντες αἰολοστόμους | χρησ-
    μούς, ἀσήμους δυσκρίτως τ' εἰρημένους.

38 Lhôte (2007: 70–72; 345–360), and Eidinow (2007: 72–124), have recently pub-
    lished, re-published, and categorized the known Dodona texts.

39 Parke 1967: 101; Lhôte 2007: 11.

40 Αἴ κα μέλλι ἐς [Σύ]βαριν ἰόντι λόϊον | ἔμεν [κ]α πράτοντι ταῦτα. Tr. (and bibliog-
    raphy) Eidinow 2007: 75, no. 2. It is generally accepted that this kind of questions
    are first-person ones, despite the lack of first-person pronouns.

41 Perhaps with the exception of one, but as we have no question to go with it, it is
    impossible to tell. This is the response that Eidinow (2007: 111, no. 5), translates
    as "It is not safe but for the man destroying everything" (οὐκ ἐστι ἀσφάλεια ἀλλ'
    ἀπωλέωντι πάντα). Of the other fourteen possible answers (of which a table can be
    found in Eidinow 2007: 123–124) one appears to be mistakenly included (p. 111,
    no. 4) and two are too fragmentary to judge. The other eleven are not always easy
    to understand, but certainly do not look like riddles. In translation: "In Kroton" (cf.
    n. 42 below), "Stay"; "Bear with your defeat" / "Put up with her"; "You should do
    nothing by land"; "Be content with the one woman you already have" (*EBGR*
    2010: no. 28); "Slaves living apart"; "To/for him setting off to Hermione"; "God ...
    to Zeus the father, concerning ... to Fortune a libation, to Herakles Erechtheis, to
    Athena Patroa" (to do with sacrifices and libations); "Stay on land, completely";

---

n by the god or his mouthpiece) would be
not in ordinary comprehensible language –
ce of Apollo at Delphi, we are unsure of the
overview of opinions on these matters, see

n the course of her dream: see Hom. *Od.*

> Side A: God … Good Luck. About possessions and about a place to live: whether (it would be) better for him and his children and his wife in Kroton? Side B: In Kroton.[42]

More importantly still, the questions seem to be such as to require a straightforward answer. But that could be modern prejudice, of course. Also, these are private enquiries. Would answers to public enquiries come in a more riddling format? In Dodona at least this was not the case. Evidence comes from Demosthenes, who relates the gist of two public oracles in one of his speeches. These oracles are straightforward:[43]

> To the people of the Athenians the prophet of Zeus announces. Whereas ye have let pass the seasons of the sacrifice and of the sacred embassy, he bids you send nine chosen envoys, and that right soon. To Zeus of the Ship sacrifice three oxen and with each ox three sheep; to Dione one ox and a brazen table for the offering which the people of the Athenians have offered.
>
> The prophet of Zeus in Dodona announces. To Dionysus pay public sacrifices and mix a bowl of wine and set up dances; to Apollo the Averter sacrifice an ox and wear garlands, both free men and slaves, and observe one day of rest; to Zeus, the giver of wealth, a white bull.[44]

Even if we assume that Demosthenes adapted the text of these oracles to the context of his argument, one can hardly imagine why he would have filled them with such clear, prosaic details if he and his audience had expected them to be gnomic utterances. As we can see, the questions asked of the supernatural at Dodona seemed to request unambiguous answers, and the answers known to us were exactly that.

Delphi had an even stronger reputation for providing riddling answers to questions, at least in the literary sources. Croesus' oracles came from Delphi (but also Oropos). With Delphi, we easily run into difficulties. The responses (and questions) found *in situ* in Dodona on rolled-up *lamellae* must have played some part in the actual enquiries made at the oracle. But for Delphi the responses have been recorded at some later date: on stone in

---

   "But if I do not send to Arybbas, but it stays here..."; "For Leton, it was advantageous ... not having confidence ... in the man from Thourioi when he placed...".

42   Side A: Θεός· τύχα ἀγαθά· | περὶ πανπασίας καὶ περὶ ϝοικέσιος | ἰς Κρ(ό)τονα ἐ βέλτιον καὶ ἄμεινο(ν) | αὐτôι καὶ γενε|ᾶι καὶ γυναι|κί. Side B: Ἐν Κρότονι. Tr. (and bibliography) Eidinow 2007: 76, no. 5.

43   For another attestation of the clarity of the Dodonaic oracle see, e.g., Din. *Dem.* 78.

44   Dem. *Meid.* 53, tr. Vince 1935: Τῷ δήμῳ τῷ Ἀθηναίων ὁ τοῦ Διὸς σημαίνει. ὅτι τὰς ὥρας παρηνέγκατε τῆς θυσίας καὶ τῆς θεωρίας, αἱρετοὺς πέμπειν κελεύει θεωροὺς ἕνεκα τούτου διὰ ταχέων, (καὶ) τῷ Διὶ τῷ Ναίῳ τρεῖς βοῦς καὶ πρὸς ἑκάστῳ βοΐ δύο οἷς, τῇ Διώνῃ βοῦν καλλιερεῖν, καὶ τράπεζαν χαλκῆν πρὸς τὸ ἀνάθημα ὃ ἀνέθηκεν ὁ δῆμος ὁ Ἀθηναίων. Ὁ τοῦ Διὸς σημαίνει ἐν Δωδώνῃ. Διονύσῳ δημοτελῆ ἱερὰ τελεῖν καὶ κρατῆρα κεράσαι καὶ χοροὺς ἱστάναι, Ἀπόλλωνι ἀποτροπαίῳ βοῦν θῦσαι, καὶ στεφανηφορεῖν ἐλευθέρους καὶ δούλους, καὶ ἐλινύειν μίαν ἡμέραν. Διὶ κτησίῳ βοῦν λευκόν.

s and about a place to live: whether
and his wife in Kroton? Side B: In

n to be such as to require a
modern prejudice, of course.
swers to public enquiries come
ast this was not the case. Evi-
s the gist of two public oracles
aightforward:[43]

f Zeus announces. Whereas ye have
e sacred embassy, he bids you send
Zeus of the Ship sacrifice three oxen
x and a brazen table for the offering
d.
s. To Dionysus pay public sacrifices
o Apollo the Averter sacrifice an ox
and observe one day of rest; to Zeus,

ted the text of these oracles to
y imagine why he would have
if he and his audience had ex-
e can see, the questions asked of
uest unambiguous answers, and

for providing riddling answers
s. Croesus' oracles came from
easily run into difficulties. The
Dodona on rolled-up *lamellae*
nquiries made at the oracle. But
d at some later date: on stone in

order to display in the *polis,* or reported in literary sources such as Herodo-
tus and Thucydides. In order to have a corpus of "historical" responses, we
use the categorisation by Joseph Fontenrose. He labelled those responses
"historical" that had been recorded within a lifetime from their supposed
pronouncement at the oracle. Fontenrose's division of the evidence into
"authentic" and "unauthentic" responses of the oracle is debatable – he
recognized the problems with this division himself.[45] Still, his choices with
respect to (near) contemporaneity can be defended – and for our current
purposes his categorization will do as well as any other.[46]

The "historical responses" (H) of Fontenrose are 75 in total and com-
prise both inscriptions and responses from literary sources. There are just
three responses that might be considered riddles: H67 (PW 467 = *IMagn.*
228), H18 (PW 259) and H7 (PW 160). In H67, an inscription, we learn of
a woman has been told in a previous oracle to appease Hera, and she sub-
sequently asks which Hera, to which the oracle answers – in Fontenrose's
translation (with a small adaptation) – "Where old age, venerable for its
many years, has been wont to bathe its honoured and aged bodies, where
unwedded maids dance rhythmically in the chorus to *aulos* accompani-
ment, at the halls of an effeminate man, worship Hera".[47] Fontenrose ar-
gues this would have been quite clear to the recipients of the response – not
so much a riddle as a poetic description.

Certainly ambiguous – but, it has to be said, with hindsight – is H18
(PW 259), where Callistratus appears to have asked whether he would
receive the benefit of the laws upon his return to Athens. To which the
Pythia replied that he would; and he was put to death after his return as a
punishment for earlier crimes. The historicity of this seems, however, quite
doubtful; indeed Fontenrose doubts the historicity of both response and
story, which is so very reminiscent of the oracle of Croesus when he heard

---

here..."; "For Leton, it was advanta-
from Thourioi when he placed...".
ς καὶ περὶ ϝοικέσιος | ἰς Κρ(ό)τονα ἒ
υναι|κί. Side B: Ἐν Κρότονι. Tr. (and

donaic oracle see, e.g., Din. *Dem.* 78.
ρ Ἀθηναίων ὁ τοῦ Διὸς σημαίνει. ὅτι
ς θεωρίας, αἱρετοὺς πέμπειν κελεύει
ῷ Διὶ τῷ Ναίῳ τρεῖς βοῦς καὶ πρὸς
ερεῖν, καὶ τράπεζαν χαλκῆν πρὸς τὸ
ν. Ὁ τοῦ Διὸς σημαίνει ἐν Δωδώνῃ,
τῆρα κεράσαι καὶ χοροὺς ἱστάναι,
φανηφορεῖν ἐλευθέρους καὶ δούλους,
ευκόν.

45 Fontenrose 1978: 7–9.

46 While Fontenrose's category "Historical" leaves us with 4 % ambiguous respons-
  es, his categories "Quasi-historical" and "Legendary" contain 7.4 % (20 out of
  268) and 5.7 % (10 out of 176) of ambiguous responses respectively – on a most
  generous count, considering as a riddle everything not immediately understandable
  to us. So abandoning Fontenrose's categorization and looking at *all* recorded Del-
  phic oracular pronouncements (except for Fontenrose's category of "Fictional", too
  small to draw any conclusions from) still leaves us with about the same tiny per-
  centage of ambiguous responses.

47 Fontenrose 1978: 189–190, and 1988: 198–109: Ἔνθα μακροῖσι χρόνοισι σεβάσ-
  μιος | εἴθισεν αἰὼν λουτροῖσιν χρῆσθαι τε|τιμημένα σώματα γήρως, οὖ χόρον |
  ἱστᾶσιν κοῦραι θαλάμων ἀμύητοι | εὐρύθμως δωτοῖο πρὸς εὔφθογγον | μέλος ἡδὺ,
  θηλυπρεποῦς φωτὸς | μελάθροις Ἥραν προσεβάζου. The translation is based
  on both Fontenrose 1978 and Fontenrose 1988: R24. In fact, this is likely to be a
  Didymaean oracle, see Fontenrose 1988: 198–199.

that he would destroy a great empire if he decided to fight the Persians, and which turned out to be his own.[48]

The last example of an apparently enigmatic response is H7 (PW 160) where the Spartans "must bring back the seed of Zeus's demigod son ... otherwise they will plough with a silver ploughshare". But this has the looks of a proverbial expression, or maybe we have to take it more or less literally.[49] Otherwise, this is an odd case, in which the Pythia is said to have been bribed in order to give this answer to any Spartan whatever his question – which argues against it being truly enigmatic.

If, despite all misgivings, we accept all three as examples of oracular ambiguity, that leaves 72 responses that are plain and clear.[50] And not only that: some responses even contain a great amount of detail, to the point of indicating, e.g., what type of grotto should be prepared for Bacchus (a "fitting" one). As Fontenrose paraphrases H31 (PW 284):

> The Amphictions must complete the work [temple?] quickly so that suppliants may be received in the proper month; they must have this hymn recited to the Hellenes at the yearly Theoxenia and offer sacrifice with supplications of all Hellas. At the quinquennial Pythian festival they must make sacrifice to Bakchos and institute a choral contest, set up an image of Bakchos by the golden lions, and prepare a fitting grotto for him.[51]

Or consider Demosthenes' report of an oracle from Delphi: there is nothing riddling about this at all (Fontenrose H29; PW 283):

> May good fortune attend you. The people of the Athenians make inquiry about the sign which has appeared in the heavens, asking what the Athenians should do, or to what god they should offer sacrifice or make prayer, in order that the issue of the sign may be for their advantage. It will be well for the Athenians with reference to the sign which has appeared in the heavens that they sacrifice with happy auspices to Zeus most high, to Athena most high, to Heracles, to Apollo the deliverer, and that they send due offerings to the Amphiones; that they sacrifice for good fortune to Apollo, god of the ways, to Leto and to Artemis, and that they make the streets

---

48 Hdt. 1.53.3.

49 See for one of the passages in which this oracle is reported Thuc. 5.16.2. Fontenrose (1978: 87 n. 62) explains it as "they will have a shortage of food, and will have to buy imported grain with silver", hesitatingly accepted by Cartledge 2000: 100. This reading goes back to a scholion. Fontenrose first suggests the proverbial nature of the saying as interpreted by the scholiast and then rejects this because it is not in any collection of proverbs. Still, "to plough with silver" = "to buy food for coin", looks proverbial to us. An alternative reading would be that silver is no good for the fashioning of ploughshares, i.e. all their efforts will remain fruitless; thus Hornblower 1991: 465. If that is what this response says, it is neither proverbial nor enigmatic.

50 A fourth possibly ambiguous text (the third answer to H3 = PW 134; 420) is not mentioned here because it is certainly spurious – Fontenrose doubts its historicity.

51 Diehl 1949: 255.

ecided to fight the Persians, and

matic response is H7 (PW 160)
seed of Zeus's demigod son ...
ploughshare". But this has the
we have to take it more or less
in which the Pythia is said to
ver to any Spartan whatever his
ly enigmatic.

ll three as examples of oracular
e plain and clear.[50] And not only
amount of detail, to the point of
ld be prepared for Bacchus (a
H31 (PW 284):

mple?] quickly so that suppliants may
ave this hymn recited to the Hellenes
ith supplications of all Hellas. At the
e sacrifice to Bakchos and institute a
by the golden lions, and prepare a fit-

cle from Delphi: there is nothing
PW 283):

the Athenians make inquiry about the
ng what the Athenians should do, or to
e prayer, in order that the issue of the
ell for the Athenians with reference to
hat they sacrifice with happy auspices
Heracles, to Apollo the deliverer, and
es; that they sacrifice for good fortune
Artemis, and that they make the streets

racle is reported Thuc. 5.16.2. Fonten-
will have a shortage of food, and will
sitatingly accepted by Cartledge 2000:
Fontenrose first suggests the proverbial
choliast and then rejects this because it
plough with silver" = "to buy food for
reading would be that silver is no good
their efforts will remain fruitless; thus
response says, it is neither proverbial

d answer to H3 = PW 134; 420) is not
ous – Fontenrose doubts its historicity.

steam with the savour of sacrifice; that they set forth bowls of wine and institute choruses and wreathe themselves with garlands after the custom of their fathers, in honor of all the Olympian gods and goddesses, lifting up the right hand and the left, and that they be mindful to bring gifts of thanksgiving after the custom of their fathers. And ye shall offer sacrificial gifts after the custom of your fathers to the hero-founder after whom ye are named; and for the dead their relatives shall make offerings on the appointed day according to established custom.[52]

Even a question about the death of Plotinus, an occasion which we might easily imagine to have evoked an ambiguous or riddling response (death being a mysterious event inviting mysterious speech), the oracle seems to respond pretty clearly that he has gone to the abodes of the blessed (Fontenrose H69; PW 473).

Thus the evidence from both Delphi and Dodona supports the notion that the daily practice of divination must have been a riddle-free and even unambiguous affair. Keep in mind that our problem is *not* whether the occasion of an individual or *polis* addressing Delphi is historical or not. The problem is only what shape the answer took. When we move beyond Delphi and Dodona, and broaden our view to include the epigraphic record of the Hellenistic and imperial period, for the discussion of which we have no opportunity here, we do not find any riddles, but extremely straightforward oracular pronouncements. One example should suffice: Ivana and Andrej Petrović have put together so-called "metrical sacred regulations" mainly of alleged oracular provenance, which accounts for their metrical form; but being "regulations" (*leges sacrae*) they can hardly be riddles.[53]

It did not escape Fontenrose that all answers in the shape of riddles that we know of are from literary texts only. Recently, Peter Struck took Fontenrose to task: "...Fontenrose's dismissal of the ambiguity of the Delphic

52 Dem. *Macart.* 66, tr. Murray 1939: Ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ. ἐπερωτᾷ ὁ δῆμος ὁ Ἀθηναίων περὶ τοῦ σημείου τοῦ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ γενομένου, ὅ τι ἂν δρῶσιν Ἀθηναίοις ἢ ὅτῳ θεῷ θύουσιν ἢ εὐχομένοις εἴη ἐπὶ τὸ ἄμεινον ἀπὸ τοῦ σημείου. συμφέρει Ἀθηναίοις περὶ τοῦ σημείου τοῦ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ γενομένου θύοντας καλλιερεῖν Διὶ ὑπάτῳ, Ἀθηνᾷ ὑπάτῃ, Ἡρακλεῖ, Ἀπόλλωνι σωτῆρι, καὶ ἀποπέμπειν Ἀμφιόνεσσι· περὶ τύχας ἀγαθᾶς Ἀπόλλωνι ἀγυιεῖ, Λατοῖ, Ἀρτέμιδι, καὶ τὰς ἀγυιὰς κνισῆν, καὶ κρατῆρας ἱστάμεν καὶ χορούς, καὶ στεφαναφορεῖν καττὰ πάτρια· θεοῖς Ὀλυμπίοις καὶ Ὀλυμπίαις πάντεσσι καὶ πάσαις, δεξιὰς καὶ ἀριστερὰς ἀνίσχοντας, μνασι-δωρεῖν καττὰ πάτρια· ἥρῳ ἀρχαγέτᾳ, οὗ ἐπώνυμοί ἐστε, θύειν καὶ δωροτελεῖν καττὰ πάτρια· τοῖς ἀποφθιμένοις ἐν ἱκνουμένᾳ ἁμέρᾳ τελεῖν τοὺς ποθίκοντας καττὰ ἀγημένα.

53 Petrović and Petrović 2006. They list 26 texts, of which at least 21 are oracular; the large majority is included in *Steinepigramme aus dem griechischen Osten* (1998–2004). Note that the metrical nature of these texts has to do with their religious nature, esp. their (alleged) oracular origin. This is what one might call pseudo-orality: these are texts designed (in writing) to look like spoken texts (pronouncements of the oracle).

oracle as nothing but a literary fiction forces him to ignore an important part of the contemporary impact of ancient oracles. Be that as it may, I am operating from the premise that even if only legendary, or quasi-historical, the literary evidence, in inception and reception, is invaluable for gauging what the Greeks *understood* divination to be".[54] We are operating from the premise that Struck's idea that the ambiguity of the oracle – even if only legendary – is invaluable for our understanding of the Greek understanding of divination, is an idea that is misleading about divination. Instead it seems likely that the answers were unambiguous statements, and that everybody knew they were, and expected to receive such answers in seeking oracular assistance themselves.[55] Our premise would be that the re-working of originally unambiguous answers into riddles, or the invention of riddles, in reporting oracular pronouncements in literary sources (or in oral story-telling, which of course we can only hypothesize about on the basis of the written texts), is invaluable for understanding the role of *ambiguous language* in Greek culture. The oracular riddle does not tell us about oracles or divination, but it *does* tell us about riddles and wordplay – or maybe something about oracles after all.

Before we come to that, we should go one step further, leave behind the discussion on the individual sources, and look at the wider picture: is our notion of actual unambiguous oracles in accordance with what we know of the general nature of Greek divination? Although religion, as was said above, seems to invite ambiguity (as, for instance, law invites unambiguous language), there are religious phenomena where clarity is called for. We always should distinguish between different aspects of religious behaviour: ambiguity may be all right in the one situation, but not in the other. In cosmological speculation or singing the praises of the supernatural, ambiguity might be welcomed. But it is obvious that in more direct communication (prayer, cursing) people tend to be quite unambiguous: they want to be heard and understood. Divination belongs in the same sphere – humans ask the supernatural to pronounce about past, present and future in order to point out the right decisions to those who are in doubt before a range of possible options. This can only function properly when answers are *not* ambiguous, but as clear as can be. One did not travel the length of the country to far-away Epirus and pay good money in order to have the oracle at Dodona pronounce something that was a riddle – which

---

54   Struck 2003: 172.
55   It did not even cross Croesus' mind, interestingly enough, to return to the famous example from Hdt. 1.55.1–56.1, that the oracle might come up with a riddle or an ambiguity. That is: Herodotus considered the idea of Croesus taking the oracle literally perfectly acceptable – although not very clever (1.90).

m to ignore an important
es. Be that as it may, I am
endary, or quasi-historical,
, is invaluable for gauging
We are operating from the
f the oracle – even if only
of the Greek understanding
out divination. Instead it
s statements, and that eve-
e such answers in seeking
uld be that the re-working
or the invention of riddles,
y sources (or in oral story-
e about on the basis of the
he role of *ambiguous lan-*
es not tell us about oracles
and wordplay – or maybe

step further, leave behind
ook at the wider picture: is
accordance with what we
? Although religion, as was
nstance, law invites unam-
ena where clarity is called
fferent aspects of religious
ne situation, but not in the
he praises of the supernatu-
obvious that in more direct
to be quite unambiguous:
ation belongs in the same
nce about past, present and
s to those who are in doubt
nly function properly when
n be. One did not travel the
ay good money in order to
g that was a riddle – which

enough, to return to the famous
ight come up with a riddle or an
a of Croesus taking the oracle lit-
ver (1.90).

would put you in the same situation you started from: you would have to solve the riddle and you might get it wrong. One came all the way to Dodona to make life easier, not more complicated. One wanted to have a clear "yes" or "no" when one has asked whether a marriage or migration or business-trip was a good idea. One wanted to have the name of a god when one has asked what god to sacrifice to in order to restore harmony.[56] The above is common sense.

Common sense, however, does not always do. We might also look at divination in a more structural way – within a model of uncertainty-management.[57] Uncertainty consists of aleatory and epistemic uncertainty. Aleatory uncertainty revolves around the idea that everything is based on chance and the outcome of any occurence cannot be predicted, while epistemic uncertainty is based on a lack of knowledge ("known unknowns" but also "unknown unknowns").[58] These two types of uncertainty cannot and should not be seen as independent categories: epistemic uncertainty springs from aleatory uncertainty. How they are evaluated in a particular society, however, will be different. In Greek society aleatory uncertainty was deemed prevalent and was accepted in the sense that life was considered a "lottery".[59] Still, Greeks tried to get some certainty about their future by means of asking the supernatural. It is this kind of divinatory certainty that is of interest here. In Greece, the questions that were asked were roughly in the form "If I do this, what will happen" or "Will the consequence of my action be good".[60] From the way these questions were phrased, it appears

---

56   Graf 2007: 118–119: "language [of the oracular pronouncement] channels cognition and replaces anxiety with the certainty of hope".

57   Cf. Beerden Forthcoming.

58   Aleatory uncertainty may be based on: inherent randomness of nature (natural randomness); value diversity (cognitive variety); human behaviour (behavioural variety); social, economic, and cultural dynamics (societal randomness); technological surprises (technological randomness). Epistemic uncertainty may be based on inexactness, lack of observations or measurements, practicalities of measurement, conflicting evidence, reducible ignorance (unknown unknowns), indeterminacy (issues that will not be known) and irreducible ignorance (issues that cannot be known); see van Asselt 2000: 86–87.

59   As testified by the popularity of dicing and games more generally – as suggested for the Roman world by Beard 2010. See for literature on Greek gaming, Fisher 2004 and Kurke 1999.

60   There are apparent exceptions, most notably the common questions "will I be happy?", "will I be cured?" or "will I have children?". These might not, however, be true exceptions: possibly they should be re-phrased as asking for the specific conditions under which happiness or procreation will be effected. Cf. Parker 2000: 83: "how long will our good fortune last?" was not a question that asked for a specific number of years or for a date, but for the insurance that things will endure as long as a certain condition is fulfilled. If true exceptions, this still does not affect

that there was no known future which divination could reveal. It is not about prediction, as in astrology. What divination did do was to diminish fears of making the wrong choice which would lead to a negative future. In other words, the primary aim of divination was not to know the future and consequently gain some control over it, but merely to ensure that the future would be positive. Elements of luck and chance were still prevalent in this future, almost to an incomprehensible degree to modern man. Where we live in a society which assumes a level of control with regards to the future, the Greek world was a "fatalistic" one in the sense that nothing could be done by man in order to gain a blueprint of the future and take appropriate actions.[61] It appears obvious that the whole idea of divination, indeed its very nature, is the reduction of uncertainty, and thus fear: the future should be positive, whatever unknown events it may bring. Divination was the most important device that ancient man had at his disposal in order to gain a sense of certainty about the future. Reducing uncertainty and fear as much as possible is not compatible with ambiguity. Considered from a psychological and economic perspective, the outcome of divination should be clear – otherwise, it would not be a practice worth keeping up, and certainly not for many centuries. There was already enough uncertainty in daily life in the ancient world as it was: divination was designed to diminish this. Ambiguity would have increased it.

4. Towards an Explanation

There is, then, a strong case for assuming that the outcome of divination was in the majority of cases completely clear-cut. It is of course possible that in some instances a message may have been ambiguous, but that is not something the usual applicant would have settled for, let alone for a rid-

---

our argument, because these are the kind of questions that ask for simple "yes" or "no" answers or for unambiguous advice.

61 See for the contrast between how we deal with the unknown future (by means of risk analysis) and how this contrasts to the premodern era, Giddens 1999: 21–23; Wilkinson 2001: 91–92; Lee 2008: 3–4. Another example: "It is hard to find a place where people use no randomizers. Yet theories of frequency, betting, randomness and probability appear only recently" (Hacking 1975: 2). See for a very interesting and accessible – to non-mathematicians – publication concerned with modern probabilistic thinking, Hacking 1990. Here the mathematics of chance is explained by means of case studies, showing the developments taking place in this respect in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

en

could reveal. It is not
did do was to diminish
l to a negative future. In
to know the future and
to ensure that the future
re still prevalent in this
nodern man. Where we
with regards to the fu-
sense that nothing could
uture and take appropri-
ea of divination, indeed
nd thus fear: the future
y bring. Divination was
his disposal in order to
g uncertainty and fear as
ity. Considered from a
me of divination should
rth keeping up, and cer-
y enough uncertainty in
n was designed to dimin-

on

e outcome of divination
. It is of course possible
mbiguous, but that is not
l for, let alone for a rid-

s that ask for simple "yes" or

unknown future (by means of
rn era, Giddens 1999: 21–23;
xample: "It is hard to find a
es of frequency, betting, ran-
king 1975: 2). See for a very
– publication concerned with
the mathematics of chance is
elopments taking place in this

dle.[62] Then why did the literary notion of ambiguous and even riddling oracles exist in the first place? We have these examples of riddling oracles – which may not have been divinatory practice, but which nevertheless were a popular depiction of the same. Struck and Rosenberger, as we have seen, think this says something about the divinatory process and its perception and reception.[63] We do not think so – or not in so direct a manner. People may have believed the riddling oracles to be historical – in the sense of being authentic; but also in the sense of being of the past, or belonging in a world that was not theirs: they would not expect oracles presenting riddles *to them*. Nevertheless, literary sources indicate there was this particular Greek paradigm embedded into the communal frame of reference, enough so to still shape present-day views of ancient oracles.[64] Herodotus uses the riddle as a literary device throughout his work, as do writers of tragedy.[65] We must assume that a Greek audience considered these riddling oracles as an acceptable way of portraying divination – despite the fact that this turned a practice which, in everybody's real life experience, should be unambiguous into something ambiguous. So we still have to ask how to account for this discrepancy between divinatory practice on the one hand, and literary fiction on the other: why did this paradox exist? Why did the Greeks select some utterly atypical examples of divination, or make up most (or all) of them?

The basis of our explanation lies in the fact that the oracular riddles occur in literary texts only, which all happen to be examples of storytelling. When we look at this from the narrative aspect, it is obvious that a riddle adds drama to a story, helps the story to unfold, prepares us for a tragic outcome.[66] We, as an audience, already know what is going to hap-

---

62 The general literature on riddles does not associate riddles with divination; we can only come up with McDowell (1994: 3580), who says: "the one who poses and finally solves the riddle occupies the seer's role". The essence is of course: "and *solves* the riddle". This compares to the diviner in the Greek world, who observes the ambiguous signs of the supernatural and turns them into an unambiguous message. In riddling, the idea is to make the riddlee sweat for a while, but the riddler will always present the solution.

63 See also Pucci 1996; but for Pucci this is completely an issue of the Greek mind – and not of divinatory *practice* at all.

64 Cf. n. 7 above.

65 For their specific function within the narrative, see, for example, the analysis of Herodotus' use of oracles in the tale of Croesus, by Kindt (2006); or, in unsurpassed detail, Crahay 1956. Intriguing is Pl. *Symp.* 192d who uses μαντεύομαι and αἰνίττομαι in the same breath, but in what relationship remains unclear.

66 Please note that riddles in a narrative context usually are no longer true riddles to most of the audience: they know the riddle and its solution. It is all about the sto-

pen and that the clue is in the riddle or ambiguity, but the main character is
unaware of this and walks into his misfortune. This is both exciting and
makes the audience feel superior. In a story, the oracular pronouncement is
much enhanced as a narrative element when it is changed from a simple
message into a riddle. But the undeniable effectiveness of the riddle as a
"literary device" is not a sufficient explanation. Something may be an ef-
fective way to tell a story, but still it should be acceptable to an audience –
which is, in this particular case, not self-evident, as the narrative ploy
stands in complete opposition to actual oracular practice.[67]

The introduction of riddles into stories about oracles was, however, ac-
ceptable for a number of reasons. First, the popularity of riddles. In the
competitive Greek societies, words were a primary locus of competition:
there can be no doubt about the popularity of wordplay in the Greek
world.[68] Riddles shared in this popularity: sympotic riddles are particularly
well attested – it seems there was no symposium without a fair number of
riddles.[69] The contest-riddle was a known form of riddling.[70] So riddling
pervaded Greek life on many levels and during many occasions.[71] To in-
troduce this much-loved phenomenon into accounts of oracles is not a huge
step. But the love of the Greeks for competition of whatever kind – and
wordplay especially – is, although demonstrably strong, not unique.[72]

---

ry's protagonist who does not know how to solve the riddle, and thereby is "beat-
en" by the story-teller and the audience, who are all "in the know".

67 An interesting comparison, or even parallel, is the literary image of the gods as
wilful, inscrutable, unreliable beings; something one will not encounter in ancient
cult where the gods are addressed most respectfully. We cannot discuss this here –
see Versnel 2011: 151–237.

68 Luz 2010.

69 Sympotic jokes are many and varied. For the analysis of a particular sympotic
joke, and references to where to find sympotic jokes in the sources, see Caponigro
1984. See also Bowie and Kwapisz in this volume.

70 Strabo 14.1.27. Of course the story of Oedipus and the riddle of the Sphinx, an
agon with words if ever there was one, was part of the mythological baggage of
every more-or-less educated Greek: see n. 10 above. On the agonistic element,
Ong 1982: 44: "proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to
engage others in verbal and intellectual combat".

71 Orality is important too for how we should appreciate this, see n. 12 above.

72 Why a culture would enjoy telling riddles in the first place, seems to require an
answer that lies well beyond the range of the historian, philologists or other hu-
manistic scholar. To use language in ways other than the literal, (relatively) unam-
biguous statement seems a human universal. Cf. Katz 2009. Huizinga in his fa-
mous study *Homo ludens* supposed play, in whatever form, to be an inherent
element of human culture. So, all play, word-play included, would be a human
trait, or rather: one of those things that make us human. We agree, but in contrast
with Huizinga, we would want to see an opposition between the sacred and the lu-

, but the main character is
This is both exciting and
oracular pronouncement is
is changed from a simple
iveness of the riddle as a
Something may be an ef-
cceptable to an audience –
ent, as the narrative ploy
ractice.[67]

oracles was, however, ac-
pularity of riddles. In the
nary locus of competition:
f wordplay in the Greek
otic riddles are particularly
n without a fair number of
of riddling.[70] So riddling
many occasions.[71] To in-
nts of oracles is not a huge
on of whatever kind – and
bly strong, not unique.[72]

he riddle, and thereby is "beat-
"in the know".
e literary image of the gods as
ne will not encounter in ancient
. We cannot discuss this here –

alysis of a particular sympotic
es in the sources, see Caponigro

nd the riddle of the Sphinx, an
of the mythological baggage of
ove. On the agonistic element,
imply to store knowledge but to

ate this, see n. 12 above.
first place, seems to require an
torian, philologists or other hu-
an the literal, (relatively) unam-
Katz 2009. Huizinga in his fa-
atever form, to be an inherent
y included, would be a human
uman. We agree, but in contrast
n between the sacred and the lu-

There are many cultures which show a deep attachment to wordplay. The riddle-solver is a common culture hero who has much in common with the trickster.[73] One need only think of Samson in the Old Testament, or of the prophet Daniel: "A notable spirit, with … the gift of interpreting dreams, explaining riddles and unbinding spells" (Dan. 5:12). Nor did the riddle become part of the perception of divination in every culture with a fond-ness for riddling.[74] Thus there are no sources indicating Mesopotamians had riddles, or fantasized about riddles, as the outcome of their divinatory process, although they did know the concept of the riddle.[75] As far as Afri-can divination is concerned, it appears that the the idea that the outcome of divination could take the shape of a riddle is not common there either – even if riddles are very popular in African cultures.[76] So we have to push on.

Secondly, we come to fear, the fear of misinterpretation. The divinato-ry process was fool-proof, except for the very last stage: you yourself. There was, then, the deep-rooted fear that human weaknesses would spoil everything, because you would not understand what the gods were telling you. The gods do not lie; they cannot lie. But you can be blind. The rid-dling stories show how the quest for coping with future uncertainties can misfire.

Institutionalisation of the divinatory process may have increased such fears. We have seen above how very "fatalistic" Greek society was.[77] A Greek had to rely on chance and luck – there was no possibility to hide behind the idea that the future could be controlled in any way. Even if divination worked to its maximum potential and a clear answer was given,

---

dic, along the lines of Roger Caillois – which would be another argument against the marriage of riddling and oracles: cf. Caillois 1950: Appendix 2 "jeu et sacré".

73 De Vries 1928.

74 See Böck 2011. For examples of a Sumerian riddle collection, see Alster 1976, Civil 1987.

75 This is an *argumentum e silentio*, but considering the huge amount of evidence on Mesopotamian divination, the complete absence of riddling cannot be ignored. The meaning of a sign could, on the other hand, be interpreted – among others – by means we would call wordplay. Yet, this is not the same as the outcome of the di-vinatory process being a riddle. See for the connection between *protasis* and *apod-osis* in the omen texts the recent Bilbija 2008.

76 Take the famous Azande: we are unsure of their general use of riddles, but Evans-Pritchard's account makes it clear that the outcomes of divinations were not in the shape of riddles. See Evans-Prichard 1937: 258–351.

77 The relation between uncertainty and play is also phrased as "Among the general characteristics of play we reckoned tension and uncertainty. There is always the question: 'will it come off?'" (Huizinga 1938, quoted after the English translation, 1970: 68).

divination was perceived as non-conclusive because the future was not
known and could not be known. While in Mesopotamia as a rule one
would ask what would happen in the future, a Greek would only ask about
the future in some specific instances, while ordinarily he would enquire
about what would be best. And who could tell what actually would be
best? You yourself maybe: you knew the circumstances from which your
question arose. But would you dare to choose a particular direction? Divi-
nation has much in common with games of chance. It is an essentially
playful way to help one through life's exigencies. With a hint from the
supernatural you will be emboldened to carry through with – or to refrain
from – your planned course of action. But oracles were institutionalised: it
is in this respect that they differed substantially from most other methods
of divination. This severely restricts the individual's role in the divinatory
process: one poses a question, one receives an answer, but one cannot join
in the observation and interpretation of the signs given by the gods. No
playing of games any more: you could not change the rules (or move the
goal posts) during the game, you got an answer and that was what you had
to make do with. But what if you did not understand it?

Stories of misinterpreted oracles are *Warnlegenden*. In the context of
the fears raised by divination (which is supposed to allay fears, but, how
human, raises new ones), riddles can function didactically: the failure of
the stories' protagonists tell one not to rely too much on oneself, not to
jump to conclusions. They also sublimate these fears in showing where
others – hubristic others – go wrong, and allowing one to feel secure in
one's superiority (because you knew the right answer to the riddle all
along). As oracles are the most institutionalised form of divination, most
bound by rules, fears are stronger there than with other divinatory practic-
es: the *Warnlegenden* about the unsolved riddle (in fact about the failure of
the human element within divination) mirror those fears.

5. Conclusions

Oracular pronouncements in the Greek world were clear and unambiguous.
Otherwise they would not have served their purpose, which was to provide
guidance to individuals or communities faced with difficult choices or
intractable problems. The non-literary evidence shows as much. The theo-
retical framework we have offered above, leaves no room for anything
else. Still, in ancient literature the riddle was introduced as a theoretical
possibility of what could happen during the consultation of an oracle.
Oracular language and ambiguity became more or less synonymous across
a wide range of literary sources. Why did Greeks find it pleasing and ac-

(left column — partially cut off at page edge)

cause the future was not
esopotamia as a rule one
reek would only ask about
dinarily he would enquire
l what actually would be
nstances from which your
particular direction? Divi-
hance. It is an essentially
ies. With a hint from the
rough with – or to refrain
es were institutionalised: it
from most other methods
ual's role in the divinatory
nswer, but one cannot join
gns given by the gods. No
nge the rules (or move the
and that was what you had
tand it?

legenden. In the context of
ed to allay fears, but, how
didactically: the failure of
o much on oneself, not to
se fears in showing where
owing one to feel secure in
t answer to the riddle all
d form of divination, most
ith other divinatory practic-
e (in fact about the failure of
ose fears.

(lower left column)

vere clear and unambiguous.
urpose, which was to provide
d with difficult choices or
e shows as much. The theo-
eaves no room for anything
s introduced as a theoretical
e consultation of an oracle.
re or less synonymous across
eeks find it pleasing and ac-

(right column — main text)

ceptable to have oracles, which they knew and expected to be unambiguous, to be portrayed as ambiguous?

Essentially, because the riddle makes for a good story. The effectiveness of the riddle as a narrative ploy is evident. But why was it acceptable to deviate so far from actual oracular practice? Because the Greeks were so fond of competition, not least in the form of all kinds of wordplay, riddles included, that the image of a riddling oracle was quite appealing to them – even if they themselves would find this unacceptable in real life. Reporting oracles – but not just oracles, think of the sphinx – becomes an occasion, an excuse for telling (and re-telling) popular riddles. Another reason for riddling oracles is that the stories about the ambiguous outcomes of divination sublimate one of the worst fears of Greek society: the fear of not understanding the divine messages, and making serious mistakes, down to and including self-destruction. Gods cannot lie, but men can: they are cheats and are apt to cheat even themselves. This is truly dramatic when the context is divination, the one occasion where the advice is utterly reliable. The help provided by the gods can be subverted by human failing. The institutionalisation of oracles, which removed the play-element that was present in the "normal" divinatory process, and which allowed one to steer the outcome into a wished-for direction, exacerbated such fears.

Thus oracles came to be seen in a riddling light, even though in real life they were meant to give certainty and reassurance. If something is a popular practice, like riddling, this practice will tend to bleed into story telling and so on, even in situations wherein it is not appropriate. Or where it is appropriate after all in showing people how not to approach divination: self-assured, self-reliant. One had better be humble, listen very carefully and try to come away with a piece of unambiguous advice that helped one to cope with life's exigencies.

Bibliography

Abrahams R. D. and A. Dundes. 1972. *Riddles*. In: R. M. Dorson (ed.), *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 129–143.

Alster, B. 1976. *A Sumerian Riddle Collection*. Journal of Near Eastern Studies 35, 263–267.

Asselt, M. B. A. van. 2000. *Perspectives on Uncertainty and Risk: The PRIMA Approach to Decision Support*. Boston: Kluwer.

Augarde, T. 2003. *The Oxford Guide to Word Games*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Aune, D. E. 1983. *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Baldwin, J. R. et al. (eds). 2006. *Redefining Culture: Perspectives across the Disciplines*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Barker, E. 2006. *Paging the Oracle: Interpretation, Identity and Performance in Herodotus' History.* G&R 53, 1–28.

Baum-vom Felde, P. 2006. *Koning Oedipus, de sfinx en het raadsel.* In: *Sfinx. De wachters van Egypte.* Brussels: ING/Mercatorfonds, 160–177.

Beard, M. 2010. *Risk and Humanities.* Darwin College Lecture Series 2010. Online at http://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/738689;jsessionid=77185E38969C6DFD0C017725CD BE3C97 (accessed August 2012).

Beerden, K. Forthcoming. *Worlds Full of Signs. Ancient Greek Divination in Context.* Diss., Leiden.

Ben-Amos, D. 1976. *Solutions to Riddles.* Journal of American Folklore 89, 249–254.

Bilbija, J. 2008. *Interpreting the Interpretation: Protasis-Apodosis-Strings in the Physiognomic Omen Series Šumma alamdimmû 3.76–132.* In: R. J. van der Spek (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Near Eastern World View and Society.* Bethesda, Md: CDL Press, 19–27.

Böck, B. 2011. *Riddles: II Ancient Orient.* In: *Brill's New Pauly* (accessed August 2012).

Brumann, C. 1999. *Writing for Culture: Why a Successful Concept Should not Be Discarded.* Current Anthropology 40, Supplement, S1–S27.

Caillois, R. 1950. *L'homme et le sacré,* 2nd ed. Paris: Gallimard.

Caponigro, M. S. 1984. *Five Men and Ten Ships: A Riddle in Athenaeus.* GRBS 25, 285–296.

Cartledge, P. 2000. *Agesilaos and the Crisis of Sparta.* London: Duckworth.

Civil, M. 1987. *Sumerian Riddles: A Corpus.* Aula Orientalis 5, 17–35.

Colli, G. 1975. *La nascita della filosofia.* Milano: Adelphi.

Colli, G. 1977. *La sapienza greca.* Vol. 1. Milano: Adelphi.

Crahay, R. 1956. *La littérature oraculaire chez Hérodote.* Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

Diehl, E. 1949. *Anthologia lyrica Graeca.* Vol. 2, 3rd ed. Leipzig: Teubner.

Dieterle, M. 2007. *Dodona. Religionsgeschichtliche und historische Untersuchungen zur Entstehung und Entwicklung des Zeus-Heiligtums.* Hildesheim: Olms.

Edwards, W. M., F. A. Wright and R. Browning. 1970. *Riddles.* In: *OCD,* 2nd ed., 924.

Eidinow, E. 2007. *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Evans-Prichard, E. E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande.* London: Clarendon Press.

Finnegan, R. 1970. *Oral Literature in Africa.* London: Clarendon Press.

Fisher, N. 2004. *The Perils of Pittalakos: Settings of Cock Fighting and Dicing in Classical Athens.* In: S. Bell and G. Davies (eds), *Games and Festivals in Classical Antiquity.* Oxford: Archaeopress, 65–78.

Flower, M. A. 2008, *The Seer in Ancient Greece,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fontenrose, J. E. 1978. *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations: With a Catalogue of Responses.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fontenrose, J. E. 1988. *Didyma. Apollo's Oracle, Cult, and Companions.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giddens, A. 1999. *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives.* London: Profile Books.

Gillison, G. 2010. *Culture: a Post-Concept?* Journal of Interdisciplinary History 41, 243–264.

Godley, A. D. 1920. *Herodotus.* Vol. 1. London: Heinemann.

Graf, F. 2007. *The Oracle and the Image: Returning to Some Oracles from Clarus*. ZPE 160, 113–119.

Hacking, I. 1975. *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hacking, I. 1990. *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hall, J. M. 2004. *Culture, Cultures and Acculturation*. In: R. Rollinger and C. Ulf (eds), *Griechische Archaik. Interne Entwicklungen – Externe Impulse*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 35–50.

Hamnett, I. 1967. *Ambiguity, Classification and Change: The Function of Riddles*. Man 2, 379–392.

Hornblower, S. 1991. *A Commentary on Thucydides Books IV–V.24*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Huizinga, J. 1938. *Homo ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink (translated as: *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. London: Temple Smith, 1970).

Ingemark, D. and C. A. Ingemark. 2007. *Teaching Ancient Folklore*. CJ 102, 279–289.

Jedrkiewicz, S. 1997. *Il convitato sullo sgabello: Plutarco, Esopo ed i Sette Savi*. Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali.

Johnston, S. I. 2005. *Introduction*. In: S. I. Johnston and P. T. Struck (eds), *Mantikê. Studies in Ancient Divination*. Leiden: Brill, 1–28.

Johnston, S. I. 2008. *Ancient Greek Divination*. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell.

Jones, W. H. S. 1933. *Pausanias: Description of Greece*. Vol. 3. London: Heinemann.

Kaboré, A. 2007. *Pacéré as the Demiurge of Orature*. Tydskrif vir Letterkunde 44, 27–40.

Katz, J. T. 2006. *The Riddle of the sp(h)ij-: The Greek Sphinx and Her Indic and Indo-European Background*. In: G.-J. Pinault and D. Petit (eds), *La Langue poétique indo-européenne: actes du Colloque de travail de la Société des Études Indo-Européennes (Indogermanische Gesellschaft/Society for Indo-European Studies), Paris, 22–24 octobre 2003*. Leuven: Peeters, 157–194.

Katz, J. T. 2009. *Wordplay*. In: S. W. Jamison et al. (eds), *Proceedings of the 20th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference, Los Angeles, October 31–November 1, 2008*. Bremen: Hempen, 79–114.

Kindt, J. 2006. *Delphic Oracle Stories and the Beginning of Historiography: Herodotus' Croesus Logos*. CPh 101, 34–51.

Konstantakos, I. M. 2004. *Trial by Riddle: The Testing of the Counsellor and the Contest of Kings in the Legend of Amasis and Bias*. C&M 55, 85–138.

Kurke, L. 1999. *Ancient Greek Board Games and How to Play Them*. CPh 94, 247–267.

Layton, M. J. 1976. *Luba and Finnish Riddles: A Double Analysis*. Journal of American Folklore 89, 239–248.

Lee, P. M. 2008. *History of Probability Theory*. In: T. Rudas (ed.), *Handbook of Probability: Theory and Applications*. Los Angeles: Sage, 3–14.

Lhôte, E. 2006. *Les lamelles oraculaires de Dodone*. Genève: Droz.

Luz, C. 2010. *Technopaignia: Formspiele in der griechischen Dichtung*. Leiden: Brill.

Manetti, G. 1987. *Le teorie del segno nell'antichità classica*. Milano: Bompiani.

Maranda, E. K. 1976. *Riddles and Riddling: An Introduction*. Journal of American Folklore 89, 127–137.

Maurizio, L. 1997. *Delphic Oracles as Oral Performances: Authenticity and Historical Evidence*. CA 16, 308–334.

McDowell, J. H. 1994. *Riddle*. In: R. E. Asher and J. M. Y. Simpson (eds), *The Ency-clopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 7. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 3578–3580.

Montuori, M. 1990. *The Oracle Given to Chaerephon on the Wisdom of Socrates: An Invention by Plato*. Kernos 3, 251–259.

Murray, A. T. 1939. *Demosthenes: Private Orations*. Vol. 2. London: Heinemann.

Mwangi, E. 2007. *Bukenya, Austin*. In: S. Gikandi and E. Mwangi (eds), *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English since 1945*. New York: Colombia University Press, 38–39.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 2007. *Notes towards a Performance Theory of Orature*. Performance Research 123, 4–7. Online at http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~hartleyg/ref/Ngugi_Orature.html (accessed August 2012).

Ohlert, K. 1912. *Rätsel und Rätselspiele der alten Griechen*. Berlin: Mayer & Müller.

Ong, W. J. 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen.

Parke, H. W. 1967. *The Oracles of Zeus: Dodona, Olympia, Ammon*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Parker, R. 2000. *Greek States and Greek Oracles*. In: R. Buxton (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 76–108.

Petrović, A. and I. Petrović. 2006. *"Look Who Is Talking Now!": Speaker and Communication in Greek Metrical Sacred Regulations*. In: E. Stavrianopoulou (ed.), *Ritual and Communication in the Graeco-Roman World*. Liège: CIERGA, 151–179.

Pucci, P. 1996. *Enigma, segreto, oracolo*. Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali.

PW = Parke, H. W., D. E. W. Wormell. 1956. *The Delphic oracle*. Vol. 2: *The Oracular Responses*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Rokem, F. 1996. *One Voice and Many Legs: Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx*. In: G. Hasan-Rokem and D. Shulman (eds), *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 255–270.

Rosenberger, V. 2001. *Griechische Orakel. Eine Kulturgeschichte*. Darmstadt: WBG.

Rougemont, G. 2005. *Les oracles grecs recouraient-ils habituellement à l'ambiguïté volontaire?* In: L. Basset and F. Biville (eds), *Les jeux et les ruses de l'ambiguïté volontaire dans les textes grecs et latins*. Lyon: Maison de l'Orient de la Méditerranée, 219–235.

Schultz, W. 1909. *Rätsel aus dem hellenischen Kulturkreise*. Vol. 1: *Die Rätselüberlieferung*. Leipzig: Hinrichssche Buchhandlung.

Schultz, W. 1914. *Rätsel*. In: *RE* 1A, 62–125.

Segal, C. 1999. *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press (1st ed. 1981).

Shultz, T. R. 1974. *Development of the Appreciation of Riddles*. Child Development 45, 100–105.

Snoek, J. A. M. 1987. *Initiations: A Methodological Approach to the Application of Classification and Definition Theory in the Study of Rituals*. Diss., Leiden.

Struck, P. T. 2003. *The Ordeal of the Divine Sign: Divination and Manliness in Archaic and Classical Greece*. In: R. M. Rosen and I. Sluiter (eds), *Andreia: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity*. Leiden: Brill, 167–186.

Thatcher, T. 2000. *The Riddles of Jesus in John: A Study in Tradition and Folklore*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

Vernant, J.-P. 1974. *Paroles et signes muets*. In: J.-P. Vernant et al., *Divination et rationalité*. Paris: Seuil, 9–25.

Vernant, J.-P. 1978. *Ambiguity [and] Rex*. New Literary History [...]

Versnel, H. S. 1990. *Ter Unus. Inconsistencies in Greek an[...]*

Versnel, H. S. 2011. *Coping w[...]* Leiden: Brill.

Vince, J. H. 1935. *Demosthenes. Aristogeiton*. London: Hein[...]

Vries, J. de. 1928. *Die Mär[...] Untersuchung*. Helsinki: Ac[...]

Weir Smyth, H. 1922. *Aeschylus [...]*

Welsh, A. 1993. *Riddle*. In: A. [...]ton Encyclopedia of Poetr[...] 1070–1072.

Wilkinson, I. 2001. *Anxiety in a [...]*

Ziegler, K. 1975. *Rätsel*. In: *Kle[...]*

Vernant, J.-P. 1978. *Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of Oedipus Rex*. New Literary History 9, 475–501.

Versnel, H. S. 1990. *Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes: Three Studies in Henotheism. Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion*. Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill.

Versnel, H. S. 2011. *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*. Leiden: Brill.

Vince, J. H. 1935. *Demosthenes: Against Meidias, Androtion, Aristocrates, Timocrates, Aristogeiton*. London: Heinemann.

Vries, J. de. 1928. *Die Märchen von klugen Rätsellösern. Eine vergleichende Untersuchung*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

Weir Smyth, H. 1922. *Aeschylus*. Vol. 1. London: Heinemann.

Welsh, A. 1993. *Riddle*. In: A. Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (eds), *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1070–1072.

Wilkinson, I. 2001. *Anxiety in a Risk Society*. London: Routledge.

Ziegler, K. 1975. *Rätsel*. In: *Kleine Pauly* 4, 1333.