Since antiquity Heraclitus’ enigmatic style has attracted attention. Aristotle refers to him as dark or obscure (skoteinos), and characterizes one of his sentences as unclear (adelos). Timon of Phlius called him riddler (ai-niktes). In light of Heraclitus’ comment on Apollo’s oracles, “The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign”, modern critics have been a bit more specific when it comes to characterizing Heraclitus’ style; “because Heraclitus himself uses language in precisely this way [i.e. as he he describes the oracle in fragment 93], we may infer that he was deliberately adopting a Delphic mode of discourse”. In one succinct formulation, “one can scarcely miss the Delphic elements in Heraclitus’ own style”. This may be one of the few commonplaces about Heraclitus where there is a unanimity of opinion. Heraclitus speaks in an oracular mode and more specifically a Delphic one.

I propose to examine this scholarly commonplace. My first question is what “elements” make Heraclitus’ sayings enigmatic. My second concerns whether these elements might properly be considered “Delphic”, and, if so, whether they generate Delphic ambiguity. My third is whether Heraclitus borrowed more than style from Delphi, or framed differently whether there
is a similar relationship between style and content in the philosopher and the Pythia’s words. These three issues – the shared stylistic elements, or technopaegnia, of both Heraclitus and Delphic oracles, the relationship between these elements and ambiguity, and the connection between these elements and meaning – all contribute to a clarification of both Heraclitus and Delphi’s enigmatic reputations, and throw light on the oral origins of later uses of technopaegnia often linked with and dependent on writing.

Charles H. Kahn, perhaps more than any other editor of Heraclitus, is keenly attuned to the “artistic design” of Heraclitus’ words “made a priori probable by the clear evidence of literary artistry in every fragment where the original wording has been preserved intact”. Some of this artistry is dependent on Heraclitus’ use of “puns”, “riddles”, and “wordplay”. Yet, many of Heraclitus’ statements “can properly be understood only as riddles”. His procedure of giving riddling signs “is conceived of less as a literary device than as an inevitable consequence of human ignorance and the recondite nature of the truth: like the utterance of Apollo, what Heraclitus has to say is necessarily enigmatic, because human beings do not have the ‘insights’ which divine wisdom can take for granted”. In Kahn’s assessment, Heraclitus’ literary devices are superbly fitted to conveying the recondite nature of truth, which owes itself to the workings of the universe, human ignorance and even to language’s capacity to reveal and hide. Even so, the literary and artistic aspects of Heraclitus’ words are secondary to the truths Heraclitus is keen to explain. In a similar vein, Uvo Hölscher writes “the similes of Heraclitus are, therefore, no mere literary device; rather, what can be seen is for him a simile for what is hidden. … In Heraclitus simile takes the place of proof”. Hölscher considers how metaphors, similes, homonyms, riddles, oracles, aphorisms and proverbs account for the poetical and enigmatic quality of Heraclitus’ words, yet are more importantly vehicles for revealing philosophical truths. Hermann Fränkel describes a “thought pattern of the geometrical mean” prevalent in Heraclitus that is akin to the analogical reasoning that informs metaphor. Fränkel too makes clear that this thought pattern conveys Heraclitus’ philosophical

5  Kahn 1964: 190.
8  Riddling paradoxes, a term that allows Hölscher to acknowledge similarities between Heraclitus’ sayings and riddles despite their differences – riddles explicitly pose questions, Heraclitus does not – include D 22, 125, 26, 60, 16, 34, 49a, 56. In Hölscher’s scheme, similes appear in D 61, 51, 90, 49a, 58 and 60. Hölscher also notes that some of these sayings include metaphors.
9  Fränkel finds the proportional ratio, defined as a:b::b:c, in D 79, 34, 107, 117, 123, 52, 2, 44, 9, 4, 29, 53, 99, 3, 45, 94, 61, 31, 36 and in D 1 and 118 when combined.
intentions. Albert Cook writes that Heraclitus is “incidentally poetic”, and thereby summarizes the general sentiment of scholars who study Heraclitus’ style. Style or form in Heraclitus serves philosophical content.

In these assessments of Heraclitus’ enigmatic style, the differences between metaphor and the genres associated with Heraclitus, i.e. riddles, proverbs, oracles and aphorisms, are not always noted, and it is not difficult to understand why. Proverbs to which aphorisms and gnomes are closely related, as well as riddles and similes are all composed from metaphors, as Aristotle analyzes in his Poetics and Rhetoric. Metaphor, in Aristotle, includes replacing genus for species, as in the use of the general term “lie” for “lying at anchor”; species for genus, as in using the specific number “ten thousand” for many; species for species, as in using “draw away” for “cleave”, both of which are specific types of “taking”, and analogy which entails using two terms from a proportion of four terms such as a:b::c:d (Poet. 1457b9–16 and Rh. 3.1411a). Aristotle’s definition of metaphor is capacious and thus includes analogies, synecdoche and metonymy.

Riddles employ metaphors in order “to express true facts under impossible combinations” (Poet. 1458a26–27); similes are a type of metaphor (Rh. 3.1406b), while proverbs are nearly identical to gnomes (Rh. 2.1394b) and are comprised of “species for species” metaphors (Rh. 3.1413a).

Scholars who study Heraclitus’ style, like Aristotle in his discussion of metaphor, do not draw firm distinctions among these interrelated terms. For the purposes of this study, it makes sense not to press for precision amongst the studies of Heraclitus’ style, but to collate their descriptions as follows. The prevalent trope in Heraclitus has been and is best described as metaphor, including simile, metonymy, synecdoche and analogy. In so far as nearly every one of Heraclitus’ statements “provides its own self-sufficient context while talking about another context”, nearly every statement about particular objects such as Delphi’s language, barley drinks, asses and carting wheels is a species-for-genus metaphor for hidden cosmic processes, even if there is debate about how and why this comparison ought or can be drawn. Because Heraclitus’ sayings appear in later collections of proverbs, these sayings are often considered proverbial in some way. Yet, proverbs have two key “characteristics: precise coinage and

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10 Fränkel (1974: 220 n. 16) writes about the proportion he discerns: “…there is much in the style of Heraclitus to remind the reader of the figurae orationis as they were taught by later rhetoricians, but in the writing of Heraclitus the subject determines the expression and not the reverse”.

11 Cook 1975: 449.


13 D 34 is clearly proverbial, on which see Robb 1983: 185–186.
general recognition”, and as such have less in common with Heraclitus’ sayings, which often defy immediate understanding and recognition. His sayings imply questions and conundrums rather than offer “experiential solutions”, and unlike a proverb that “summarizes common experience” and hence is backward-leaning, Heraclitus’ sayings look at the present. Riddles, on the other hand, like Heraclitus’ sayings, pose questions and present everyday objects and ideas in ways that defy general recognition. Like oracles, riddles are forward-looking in so far as they require answers or further thought in order to have any meaning. Of all the genres with which Heraclitus has affinities, riddles offer the best comparandum. Heraclitus’ sayings are also deemed aphorisms or gnomes, both cousins of proverbs, because his sayings are marked by balanced phrases and terseness. The balance or parallelism between phrases that contain contradictions tends to heighten Heraclitus’ paradoxes and thereby accentuates the puzzling nature of his words. This trait is best understood as a consequence of the oral culture Heraclitus inherited and operated within. Heraclitus has converted balancing cola from the hexameter that he eschews into “binary schemes” and “parallelism” appropriate to prose. In short, then, Heraclitus’ enigmatic style is best and most often compared to riddles, and largely depends on metaphors and balanced cola, whose use grows out of the cultural moment in which Heraclitus lived, a moment when Greece was gradually moving from oral verse to written prose.

The balanced cola or parallelism that is so pervasive in Heraclitus’ sayings is explained in Kevin Robb’s study of oral performance and Heraclitus’ social context.

16 Cook 1975: 443.
18 Cook 1975: 442.
19 Cook (1975), Kahn (1979), Most (1999), Poster (2006), and Robb (1983) provide a comprehensive examination of this moment and its consequences for the poetics of early Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus.
20 Charting a midway course between those scholars who argue Heraclitus composed a book in continuous prose and those who argue that Heraclitus’ book was a collection of sayings that could be orally performed, Most (1999: 357) charts a tertium quid. Heraclitus’ book, in his view, had an “external organization [that] may have been simply a collection of aphorisms … [with] individual memorable formulations, applicable to a variety of situations, grouped perhaps by subject matter, but each effective more on its own terms than because of its place in a chain of arguments”. These “individual memorable formulations” imply a performative context for Heraclitus and this performative context then shapes these sayings as much as their philosophical content. Thus a pragmatic approach to Heraclitus that takes
that favor a formalist approach to Heraclitus’ style.\(^{21}\) Robb locates salient elements that contribute to the enigmatic quality of Heraclitus’ words, among which parallelism plays a large part. Robb compares Heraclitus’ sayings to Hebrew proverbs and Egyptian wisdom literature,\(^{22}\) which in Miriam Lichtheim’s analysis have an “orational style”, “a form of poeti-
cized speech, although an unusually uniform one, because it is rhythmed
by exploiting the echo principle”.\(^{23}\) Such poeticized speech is prose, not
poetry, and is marked by sound play that serves to make it memorable so
that it can be easily remembered in a society where oral modes of trans-
mission are still viable ways of preserving information.\(^{24}\) This orational
style includes alliteration, internal “sound links”, assonance, consonance,
parallelism, chiasmus, word plays, onomatopoeia.\(^{25}\) These aural devices
first and foremost serve mnemonic needs, and are then perceived as poetic
because they arrest the listener’s attention.\(^{26}\) These elements appear fre-

\(^{21}\) To look at the context of Heraclitus’ performances that is implied in this sort of
analysis is to shift from a formal analysis of Heraclitus to a pragmatic or perfor-
mance analysis. See Martin 2009 on proverbs. Martin lays out the variety of ap-
proaches to proverbs, ancient and modern, and considers the differences between
pragmatic analyses that consider proverbs and riddles as culturally shaped perfor-
mances and formal analyses such as Aristotle offers. Martin suggests that while
Aristotle is a formalist who rarely conveys by whom, where and when proverbs
were performed, Aristotle does suggest that proverbs are appropriate for old men,
not children, uses vocabulary that suggests proverbs were performed, and com-
ments on proverbs in tragedy where social performance may be discerned.


\(^{23}\) Robb (1983: 175) writes, “Whether or not the collection [Egyptian Instructions]
was ever read privately, in part or as a whole, is strictly speaking not relevant, for
the style of the core of the genre, the sayings or proverbs, remains that of some-
thing designed to be recited, and, it should be stressed, memorized”.

\(^{24}\) Robb 1983: 178.

\(^{25}\) Robb (1983) documents the occurrence of these devices in the first fifteen sayings
of Diels’ collection.

\(^{26}\) This sequence of cause and effect matches Slings’ analysis of Herodotus’ organi-
zation of information in his orally orientated sentences. Slings (2002: 63) writes,
“A figure of speech is a fixed strategy used for arranging information, borrowed
from everyday language but employed in such a way that the competent native
reader/listener will recognize it as untypical of everyday language and interpret it
as literary”. Similarly, Robb (1983: 161) following Havelock argues that these
containers helped preserve in memory Heraclitus’ sayings: “poetry was called into
existence in preliterate ages to subserve the needs of oral memory, what Havelock
calls cultural storage: the self-contained saying is an important but neglected in-
strument or device of oral memory, which in turn is compounded of parts which
are ancient mnemonic devices”.

quently in Heraclitus and are not merely functional, or simply operative at the level of sound. In Roman Jakobson’s formulation, when sound echoes make words congruent, these words are necessarily “evaluated in respect to similarity and/or dissimilarity in meaning”.27 Aural conventions, including repetition in metric patterning and in grammatical structures, then, are not merely ornamental. Making two words or phrases equivalent or parallel through sound, acoustic conventions interfere with any straightforward referential meaning a word or phrase might have and make it “symbolic, multiplex, polysemantic” and therefore also often ambiguous. A few examples will indicate how these devices work together to make Heraclitus’ sayings enigmatic.

Heraclitus records one famous riddle that captures how riddles are “paradoxical descriptions [that] seem incapable of being satisfied, because they embody self-contradiction” and thus provoke reflection because they pose “a seeming head-on conceptual collision”.28 When Homer approaches some boys fishing, they tell him, presumably in response to his question about what they are doing or fishing for, “What we see and catch we leave behind; what we neither see nor catch we carry away”.29 The answer to this seeming impossibility is “lice”. This riddle occurs in one of the longest fragments of Heraclitus and may convey, as Heraclitus’ statement about the Pythia at Delphi does, a programmatic aspect of Heraclitus’ work.30 Knowledge comes from the struggle to understand a contradiction that is “difficult at first and obvious later” and from our capacity to see and grasp what may or may not be present.31 The riddle reads as follows,

ὅσα εἴδοµεν καὶ ἐλάβοµεν, ταῦτα ἀπολείποµεν,
ὅσα δὲ οὔτε εἴδοµεν οὔτ’ ἐλάβοµεν, ταῦτα φέροµεν.

The riddle achieves its effect through various sound echoes that heighten its paradox. Two balanced clauses of eighteen syllables include the repetition of two verbs (εἴδοµεν and ἐλάβοµεν), two relative pronouns (ὅσα), and two demonstratives (ταῦτα), as well as six words ending in -οµεν. The jingle of these aural repetitions conveys the provocative teasing of young boys confronting an old man, and emphasizes the riddle’s apparent contra-

29 D 56.
30 Hölscher (1974: 231) writes, “The point, conveyed merely by the riddle form, is: Things, too, present a paradoxical, secret reality, which at the same time, is manifest. Things themselves are a riddle to be solved”.
31 Kahn 1979: 112.
32 Here and throughout, I break Heraclitus’ prose (and prose Delphic oracles) into cola in order to make the stylistic features I discuss more obvious.
diction that bars immediate comprehension or solution. The listener must distinguish between two contradictory claims made in the same language and then reconcile them in order to come up with an answer.

Other sayings of Heraclitus lack the riddling frame that is provided in the tale about Homer yet have an aural style and a paradoxical pattern that is typical of riddling, such as “The sea is the purest and foulest water: for fish drinkable and life sustaining; for men undrinkable and deadly”. Hölscher writes “It is difficult to decide whether sea-water is simile or phenomenon for him; the phenomenon is simile”. The paradoxical phrasing of Heraclitus’ saying compels us to agree with Hölscher and consider that the sea is something more than salt water and is a simile or a metaphor for some hidden structure of the world.

θάλασσα ὕδωρ καθαρώτατον καὶ µιαρώτατον, ήθόσι µὲν πότιµον καὶ σωτήριον, ἄνθρωποις δὲ ἄποτον καὶ ὀλέθριον.

“The purest and foulest water” is a thirteen-syllable phrase whose superlatives contain the same number of syllables and identical endings. This phrase is followed by two twelve-syllable phrases with parallel syntax and homoeoteleuton. The repeated ending -ον makes all six adjectives that describe this water near aural equivalents, thus highlighting the contradictory aspects of the water Heraclitus describes. The “answer” to this rhythmic three-clause saying is the first word in Heraclitus’ saying, “the sea”. It is not difficult to see how this statement, like many of Heraclitus’ statements, can become a riddle. What is drinkable and undrinkable, life giving and life taking, polluted and pure? The sea. What is always changing and always the same? A river. What is both straight and crooked at the same time? The corkpress. Who gives birth to slaves and free men at the same time? War. When is chaff gold? When you are a mule. “Who is absent while present? Answer: a deaf person”. When is one man many? When he is brave. What goes up and down and is one and the same? A road. In Gallop’s analysis, these sayings do not explicitly pose a question as a riddle does. Yet in so far as their arrangement of words and sounds, or deployment of tropes and paradoxes confounds meaning, their similarities to riddles can be observed. Cook writes that Heraclitus’ sayings “are whole

33 D 61, on which see Kahn 1979: 185–189.
35 D 61 (sea), 9 (asses), 59 (carting wheel), 53 (war), 77 (death and delight), 12 and 91 (river).
37 Gallop (1989: 128) lists D 125, 49, 59, 60, 103, 61, 12, 49a, 51, 48. Hussey (1999: 94) writes about D 60, 103, 59, 125 (on Gallop’s list) and 11, 58, 9, 56 (not on Gal-
entities, but riddlingly, they are at the same time not whole entities: they advertise the fact that there is a process by which they require completion”.

In the famous and brief “the bow: its name is life, its work is death”, Heraclitus deploys a homonym in order to address a “concern with the truth and falsity of names, with ‘etymology’ understood as a search for the deeper significance hidden in words and naming”. This saying too exploits parallelism, ὄνοµα βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος. Recited without the particle δέ, the halves have an equal number of syllables and the repetition of -ος at the end of two words creates a catchy phrase whose rhythm reinforces the paradox of Heraclitus’ words. And while Heraclitus uses the bow to interrogate the hidden structure of the world through the hidden recesses of words, we can rewrite Heraclitus’ saying as a riddling question with little effort, namely “when is life death? When it is a bow”. Thus we can see how the bow is a metaphor for how nature loves to hide and contains two opposing meanings in itself. Despite the notoriety of the bow fragment, homonyms do not play a large role in Heraclitus’ sayings, though they are common in riddles. In the riddle, “When is a bird sad? When it is a blue bird”, blue is a homonym – one of two words with the same spelling and different meanings.

While this use of a homonym is nearly unique in Heraclitus, homonyms occur frequently in Delphic oracles, where the more common sources of Heraclitus’ enigmatic quality, metaphor, riddling paradox and sound echoes, also appear. In order to explore whether these elements generate Delphic ambiguity, I will concentrate here only on the oracles attributed to Delphi in Herodotus’ Histories, despite scholarly debate about whether Herodotus’ oracles bear any relationship to oracles issued at the divinatory ritual at Delphi. In one view, Herodotus, or perhaps Delphic officials and/or Herodotus’ informants, but not the divinatory ritual at Delphi, is the source of Delphic oracles in his Histories. Delphi’s reputation for ambi-

38 Gallop 1989; Cook 1975: 446.
40 Kahn 1979: 201; Poster 2006: 3.
41 Crahay 1956; Fontenrose 1978; Bowden 2005; Kindt 2006 and Neerebout in this volume. The reasons for seeing no connection between the ritual at Delphi and the ambiguous versified and/or playful oracles vary. Bowden argues that the epigraphical oracles from the middle of the fifth century wherein Delphi approved or advised against a course of action proposed by a client is typical of the oracles issued centuries early. Thus almost all depictions of oracles that vary from epigraphical evidence, which often contains the formulaic “it is better for you to…”, are dramatic representations that serve the narrative and ideological purpos-
guity and its manner of speech are, in this view, a successful, influential mirage created by crafty priests and/or imaginative story-tellers. I find this view unpersuasive and have argued elsewhere that Delphic oracles of a variety of types issued from the Pythia during a divinatory ritual. For the purposes of this paper, the relationship between Herodotus’ oracles and the divinatory ritual may be temporarily placed aside. What we can say, at least initially, is that Herodotus is one of the earliest recorders of Delphic oracles, and thus his oracles comprise the earliest chronological layer of the Delphic tradition, however one understands their relationship to divination at Delphi. Herodotean oracles then convey the Delphic tradition as Heraclitus might have known it and thus provide the best evidence for assessing the well-noted stylistic affinities between the Delphic tradition and Heraclitus’ words.

Delphic ambiguity is frequently noted or mentioned in scholarship on Delphi. And yet, because of the diversity of oracles within the tradition, there are remarkably few analyses of the formal devices or of the communicative context of oracle performances that might explain oracular ambiguity. Joseph Fontenrose uses the word “ambiguous” to describe certain “modes” of oracular advice and provides the most comprehensive accounting of oracular ambiguity. Fontenrose tends to associate oracles he considers ambiguous with folklore, a category he derives from later literature as much as Greek literature. This category, he notes, includes proverbs and

does of those who record them. In Kindt’s view, Herodotus’ oracles must be understood as a consequence of Herodotus’ historiographical aims rather than in relation to the divinatory ritual. Beerden and Naerebout use comparative evidence about divination to suggest that riddles and ambiguity are untypical of divination. Hence ambiguous and riddling oracles may be attributed to Delphi, but are not part of the divinatory ritual.

Maurizio 1995 and 1997. In their collection of oracles, Parke and Wormell (PW) consider that ambiguous oracles and verse oracles were issued during the divinatory ritual. Others who do not draw a clear line of demarcation between Herodotean oracles and the divinatory ritual at Delphi and who accept that Delphic oracles were ambiguous include Parker 1985, Price 1985, and Morgan 1990, all listed in Bowden 2005: 51 n. 15, to which can be added Malkin 1987, Vernant 1991, Flow-er 2008.

One sixth of the corpus is in hexameter verse, collected in Andersen 1987, while most are in prose. Oracles are sometimes quoted directly and are quite long, and at other times they are recorded in indirect discourse and are remarkably brief. They are found in a chronologically wide range of sources dating from the fifth century BC to fourth century AD, which include tragedies, comedies, histories, epigraphical sources and collections such that of Oenomaus.


Fontenrose 1978: 15, 20 and chart on p. 21.
riddles which in turn deploy metaphors and homonyms. In his survey of divination, Giovanni Manetti explains divination in terms of native logic and reasoning. While Manetti’s focus is not exclusively on Delphi, his list of the causes of ambiguity, like Fontenrose’s, includes homonyms, metaphors, riddles, and a “switch in perspective”. These studies of Delphic oracles and divination find that their ambiguity is caused by elements similar to those revealed in analyses of Heraclitus’ style. Delphic oracles, like Heraclitus’ sayings, deploy tropes most notably metaphors, which often occur in the genres with which oracles overlap, namely proverbs and riddles, and they also deploy homonyms. While some Delphic oracles deploy hexameter verse, less frequently iambic, there are to date no studies of acoustic devices such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, homoeoteleuton, and word repetition in Delphic oracles. From my survey of the Delphic oracles recorded by Herodotus, whether in verse or prose, metaphors and acoustic devices occur with considerable frequency. Thus at first glance it seems that the sources of Heraclitus’ ambiguity might rightfully be called “Delphic elements” since these elements appear in many Delphic oracles. A few examples will demonstrate the occurrence of these devices, their relationship to oracular ambiguity, and their similarity and differences to the devices in Heraclitus’ sayings.

While hexameter verse provides oracles with a sonic framework, so too does the occurrence of sound echoes of the sort evident in Heraclitus’ sayings. These sound echoes occur in verse oracles as well as prose oracles, even in those reported in indirect discourse. When Glaucus asks if he might renege on a promise, the Pythia tells him that the Oath-god’s son will seek revenge on his descendents. Fearing this punishment, Glaucus asks if he might be forgiven for his impious question and the Pythia says, “to ask the god is equivalent to doing the deed”. Were the oracle recorded in direct speech δύνασθαι, an infinitive, would most likely have been δύναται. Thus each of three phrases of five syllables ends in a similar

47 Manetti 1993.
48 Delgado (1986) studies Hesiod in relation to oracles and offers a model of the sort of close analysis of oracles that does not appear elsewhere.
49 In my preliminary survey of 58 oracles attributed to Delphi in Herodotus as collected by Parke and Wormell, 31 different oracles exhibit one or more of the following devices: 19 contain metaphors (PW 31, 33, 39, 53, 54, 60, 65, 67, 70, 72, 81, 84, 92, 94, 95, 100, 101, 107, 108), 4 contain homonyms (PW 6, 7, 49, 86), 7 have parallel clauses (PW 35, 36, 52, 63, 92, 94), 3 have chiasmus (PW 52, 67, 116), 7 have repetition of words including anaphora (PW 8, 10, 31, 35, 49, 52, 82), 7 have assonance or consonance (PW 6, 33, 41, 83, 91, 92, 93).
50 PW 36. Other examples of prose oracles with sound echoes include PW 83 and 93.
sound (-αι) and makes equivalent units that underscore the meaning of the Pythia’s words.

tὸ πειρηθῆναι τοῦ θεοῦ
cαὶ τὸ ποιῆσαι
ιὸν δύνασθαι.

The Pythia addresses the Cretans in direct discourse and in prose. Her response contains not only hints of rhythmic patterns because of its traces of iambic verse, as Parke and Wormell suggest, but also consonance. She says ὦ νήπιοι, ἐπιµέµφεσθε ὅσα ὑµιν ἐκ τῶν Μενέλαου τιµωρηµάτων Μίνως ἐπέµψε µηνίων δακρύµατα…

The repetition of the sounds in the names Menelaus, Minos and the Greek word for anger (menion) draws a parallel between these leaders as well as hints that the name Minos may be etymologically connected to anger.

While more examples of alliteration and sound echoes can be found in prose utterances, these in general do not contribute to or cause the Pythia’s words to be ambiguous, as in the Cretan oracle. In one instance in a hexameter oracle, the rhythmic repetition of the word “children” seems to generate some ambiguity because Herodotus labels the oracle in which this repetition appears ἄµφιδεξίον (“ambiguous”). When Cypselus enters Apollo’s temple, he receives the oracle, “Blessed is this man who enters my house | Cypselus the son of Eetion, king of famous Corinth | he and his children, but not the children of his children (are blessed). The last line, αὐτὸς καὶ παῖδες, παίδων γε µὲν οὐκέτι παῖδες, contains a form of the word “children” three times. Like the Sphinx’s riddle that conflates three stages of a man’s life, this last line conflates three generations of Cypselus’ descendants and thus appears to confuse its recipient. Yet, without Herodotus’ label ἄµφιδεξίον we might not consider this oracle ambiguous because it is rather easy to supply “are blessed” from line one and make sense of line three. This raises an interesting puzzle about how and when to define an oracle as ambiguous.

51 PW 93.
52 PW 8.
53 How and Wells (1989 ad loc.) in their commentary on ἄµφιδεξίον write, “Since the oracle is in no sense ambiguous this is best taken as two-handed, that is, two-edged, in the sense that while promising success to Cypselus and his sons, the oracle also prophesies the deposition of his grandsons”. Since the oracle’s meaning seems very clear to us, one may be inclined to accept How and Wells’ interpretation of ἄµφιδεξίον. Yet, their interpretation ignores that the Bacchiadae also failed to understand and considered ἄσηµον another oracle they received, despite the fact it had the same meaning as another oracle they knew, or so Herodotus tells us (5.92b). In sum, Herodotus paints the Bacchiadae as inept oracle-interpreters. Moreover, Lucian (Iupp. trag. 43) uses ἄµφιδεξίον to describe the oracle that
Many metaphors in Delphic oracles are of the species-for-species type. Croesus is told he will rule until a mule sits on the throne of Persia. A mule, it turns out, is a species of hybrids, as is Cyrus who is of mixed race and who sits on Persia’s throne and defeats Croesus.54 King Arcesilaus of Cyrene is told that, should he find an oven full of jars, he should not bake it.55 Upon finding his enemies in a tower, he sets it on fire, an act which leads to his demise. When the Argives ask Delphi how they might fare best when they hear the Persians are about to invade, the Pythia gives them three lines of hexameter verse filled with consonance and alliteration. She tells them that they are despised by their neighbors, though loved by the gods, and that they ought to sit holding a spear and protecting their head, for their head will guard the body.56 The oracle seems to advise the Argives not to join the Greeks against the Persians, advice which the Argives ignore. The oracle uses a species-for-species metaphor of a person sitting on guard for the city, whose head may refer to the city’s ruling elite, and whose body may refer to the population. The wooden wall oracle too may be considered a species-for-species metaphor.57 These sorts of metaphors display great variation and several remain undeciphered.58

The most famous ambiguous oracle is one that Croesus receives, “If crossing the Halys river you go to war, you will destroy a great kingdom”.59 “Great kingdom” is a genus-for-species metaphor and as such its possible application is not specific.60 Similarly, the Pythia says to Tisamenus who makes inquiry at Delphi concerning children that he will win five great contests.61 Tisamenus believes that these are athletic contests. Yet the Spartans, when learning of this oracle, interpret the great contests to be military and have Tisamenus accompany them on their military campaigns. The Spartan exegetical efforts inform the reader as much

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54 PW 54.
55 PW 70.
56 PW 92.
57 PW 95.
58 PW 65.
59 PW 53.
60 Aristotle mentions this oracle in his discussion of ambiguity which follows his discussion of metaphor (Rh. 3.1407a–b). It is perhaps the location of “great kingdom” in an oracle that leads Aristotle to define it as an ambiguous form of speech rather than as a “genus for species” metaphor.
61 PW 107.
as Tisamenus that his oracle has more than one interpretation. Without the Spartan intervention, this oracle might not be recognized as multivalent and ambiguous. Yet, another genus-for-species metaphor underscores how the interpretations of oracles in their framing story help determine whether an oracle might be considered ambiguous.

When Dorieus, the younger brother of Cleomenes, leaves Sparta, he receives advice from Antichares of Eleon to take Eryx, the region in western Sicily that belonged to Heracles and thus to Dorieus. Dorieus consults with Delphi and is told “to take it”. In Italy, he is asked by the Crotoniates to help them take Sybaris, a request he promptly meets. Yet he does not take Eryx, the land he set out for. The Sybarites claim that Dorieus did not succeed in establishing Eryx because he went beyond what Delphi predicted and engaged in battle as an ally of the Crotoniates. The Sybarites’ reasoning is not typical of the sorts of reasoning one finds in the Delphic tradition. Like the oracle that tells Croesus he will destroy a great kingdom and does not specify which great kingdom, Dorieus’ oracle does not specify which land he will take. Simon Hornblower writes, “The colony in Sicily also failed, although this one was endorsed by Delphi to the extent that he [Dorieus] was promised he would ‘take the place he was sent against’ (but if he took Sybaris then he had in a sense ‘used up’ this oracle prematurely and the oracle was not actually falsified).” Hornblower’s explanation is consistent with how ancients interpret oracles in the Delphic tradition. Through his discernment that the object the Pythia promised Dorieus was unstated and hence unclear, Hornblower thereby has made the Delphic oracle ambiguous. A consideration of oracle performances that includes interpretations thus contributes to the classification of whether a metaphor or homonym can be read in more than one way and hence whether an oracle might be considered ambiguous. This suggests that a purely formal analysis of oracles will yield a different classification of their elements and hence an oracle’s ambiguity. A look at homonyms will confirm this observation, and thus point to a key difference in the elements shared by Heraclitus’ sayings and the oracles.

A contingent of Phocaeans who flee from their home in Asia Minor when under attack by Harpagus and the Persians settles in the town of Alalia in Corsica. This site was founded by Phocaeans some twenty years earlier on the advice of an oracle that told them to found Cyrnus. Cyrnus is the ancient Greek name for Corsica. Because the new contingent of Pho-

62 PW 72.
63 Hornblower 2007: 110.
64 See the discussion of PW 8 above, especially n. 53.
65 PW 49.
caeans causes so much trouble in Alalia for their neighbors, they are attacked and decide to leave Corsica and establish Elea. Herodotus explains that they founded this new colony because a man from Posidonia informed them that when the Pythia advised them to establish Cynus, she meant the hero not the island. Without the framing narrative, the capacity of the homonym Cynus to generate two interpretations would not be apparent. Such is also the case in another oracle with a homonym. When Cleomenes of Sparta sets out to defeat the Argives, he receives an oracle that he will “take Argos” (Ἄργος αἱρήσειν). After he burns down a grove on the Argive plain, he learns that it was sacred to a hero named Argos, and shouts that Apollo has deceived him when he said, “take Argos”. Cleomenes realizes that he has unwittingly fulfilled the oracle in a way he had neither anticipated nor wished. Cleomenes’ interpretation allows us to identify a word as a homonym that refers to two different things. Framing narratives, then, begin to shift any formal analysis of the devices that might account for oracular ambiguity into one that considers context and performance. The presence of framing narratives therefore plays a critical role in understanding Delphic ambiguity and requires some consideration because Heraclitus’ sayings lack such frames.

All of the elements in Delphic oracles that cause confusion are best understood as narrative motives in so far as they create confusion on the part of Delphi’s clients and interest on the part of the listener of a Delphic tale. The client’s response, especially when it is a misreading, spurs observation not on the efficacy of Apollo’s prophecy, but on how oracles mean, because the search for what will come to be the correct interpretation is tantamount to the search for the future. The dramatic endings of oracular tales suture the gap between word and thing that an oracle initially presents. So forceful is this suturing that one forgets that the oracle posed a possible opening between words and the world. Since this gap is often displaced onto and evaluated as a measure of the foolishness or arrogance of the enquirer, the interpretative dimensions of oracles are easily overlooked. And yet, it would be a mistake to see interpretative mistakes only as indications of the character of Delphic clients, even if Delphic tales reap delight in their listeners because so often the mighty, like Croesus, are laid low because of something as silly as a mule.

66 PW 86.
67 Murray (2001: 31 n. 36) goes so far as to invert the relationship between oracle and framing narrative in assessing the authenticity of oracles: Fontenrose, Murray writes, “takes a skeptical view of all oracles which serve as a basis for moralizing historical narratives; but that is often to invert the relationship between fixed text (oracle) and flexible reality: it is the event which is ‘quasi-historical’, not the oracle”.
Delphic divination and Delphic tales codified an interest in interpretation and indicated that the universe is measured in divine terms or words that hover on the edges of human understanding. It would be a mistake to let the likes of Croesus or the wit of many Delphic tales distract us from speculative and experimental modes of thought that were part of the divinatory ritual at Delphi and Delphic tales. Each provided a structure in which to reflect upon how the gods may oversee human affairs from a distance that may or may not be traversed by human beings. Each also established a suspicion that a word may not mean what it appears to mean, or what one may desire it mean. In the latter instance, oracles implicitly address how human desires inflect interpretation, though not the course of events that the oracle indicates. The interpretative posture Delphi inculcated or encouraged depended upon the ambiguous style of Delphic oracles. Whether in all instances the Pythia generated this ambiguity or an interpreter, such as the Phocaeans or Cleomenes, was motivated to find it in order to interpret the oracle in a way that was favorable to his desires is not easily determined.

In his recent examination of allegorical readings in antiquity, Peter Struck demonstrates that oracular interpretation contributed to an artistic and philosophical interest in how literary texts and the words and symbols in them acquire meaning. Struck canvasses the overlap between interpretations of divine signs and allegorical interpretations of poetic texts, and observes that both sorts of interpretation pursue the connection between a word or symbol and its ontological referent. Such early allegorical and oracular interpretations, he writes, “can be fruitfully supplemented by a brief look at a few of the more prominent pre-Aristotelian theories of language” such as that of Heraclitus, while noting that later Neoplatonists and Stoics “borrow power for poetic symbols from divine omens” even more than from such early philosophical treatments of language. Struck’s discussion of the mutual influences among oracular interpretation, philosophical reflections on language, and allegorical readings of poetic works, largely documented in later texts, suggests that oracular tales and specifi-

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68 For example, Struck (2004: 38) outlines how the commentator of the Derveni Papyrus, one of the first to lay the foundations of allegorical interpretation, treats the poetic text as “a repository of great (and even sacred) hidden truths, which are conveyed in riddles through the whole poem, in a manner that resembles the semantically dense language of oracular speech, esoteric philosophy and cultic practice”.


70 Struck 2004: 51

71 Struck 2004: 187. Most (1999) argues that allegorical readings of poetry were recuperative acts of philosophers.
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Heraclitus makes several references to Delphi in addition to “the lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign”. Heraclitus describes the (Delphic) Sibyl whose “voice carries through a thousand years because of the god who speaks through her”. Heracleitus also plays with the Delphic motto “know thyself” in two fragments, “I went in search of myself” and “It belongs to all men to know themselves and to think well”. The first statement suggests that one must search for one’s self and hence that one is separated from or other than the self that Delphi suggests one ought to know. The second seems to imply that self-knowledge is readily available, and may not require the effort implied in the Delphic saying or in Heraclitus’ quest. While Kahn considers this second saying a “formal challenge to the Delphic proverb”, it deploys the same verb as Delphi (γιγνώσκειν) and may in fact be consonant with Delphi’s saying. In both, one ought to and is able to know one’s self.

Even if we allow that Heraclitus’ precise meaning may or may not comport with Delphi’s motto, it is significant that Heraclitus is in conversation with the Delphic tradition, and that both are concerned with knowledge about the self and cosmos. Here it seems as if Heraclitus is not simply shaping or preserving the Delphic tradition. Rather, he is articulating an aspect of the Delphic tradition that is largely overlooked in modern scholarship, namely its concern with knowledge more broadly understood (i.e. not in relation to a particular question). Most importantly, Heraclitus’ references to Delphi, unlike his many references to other poets and thinkers, are unique in so far as he offers no critique of Delphi. In Carol Poster’s description, “Heraclitus is one of several archaic thinkers who wrestled with the problem of expressing ideas in verbal genres belonging to a cultural tradition that they were criticizing. They had available the discourses of ritual, traditional epic, and ordinary speech, but none of these

72  D 92.
73  D 101 and D 116
74  Lesher 1983: 159–163 on Heraclitus’ use of γιγνώσκειν compared to Homer’s.
75  Barker 2006: 3.
76  Granger 2004b: n. 17 on Delphi’s influence on Heraclitus.
77  See D 5, 15, 40, 42, 56, 57, 58, 81, 104, 106, 121, 129, A 22 and A 23 for criticisms of poets and thinkers and D 5, 14, 15, 68, 69, 92, 93, 96 for criticisms of religious practices and ideas, with Adomenas 1999, who examines how Heraclitus re-interpreted, not simply rejected, religious practices.
were precisely commensurable, formally or ideologically, with their radically
new conceptions of the world.” 78 Unlike Homer and Hesiod – the
dominant cultural forces of his times who offered both an account of the
divine and the foundations of the universe, and a manner of speaking about
them79 – Delphi’s manner of describing a world where mules are kings and
mute sons speak was commensurable, formally and, I would argue, ideolo-
gically, to the truth Heraclitus was aiming to explicate and the manner in
which he wished to express it.

Indeed, Heraclitus is rather a Pythia manqué. Like her, he asserts his
authority over his listeners because of their ignorance. In “noncomprehend-
ing even after hearing | they are like the deaf | to them witnesses the saying
| absent yet present” 80 Heraclitus expresses a concern with knowledge
associated with the senses, particularly hearing and its difference from
understanding, an idea that appears in the first Herodotean oracle, 81 and in
so doing Heraclitus adopts the Pythia’s posture of contempt for her audi-
ence. The Pythia tells the Megarians that they do not deserve to be consid-
ered in any account of noble peoples, that the Spartans have asked for too
much in their council about attacking Arcadia, that Aglaos is happier than
Gyges who asked if he was happiest of all, that Myson is wiser than the
client who wished it was himself, that Apollo will not answer King Al-
yattes until he performs a religious task, that Croesus is foolish. 82 Rebuk-
ing kings is a favorite pastime of Delphi as these examples suggest. While
Solon may have to educate rather than berate Croesus for his excessive
confidence in his good fortune, Apollo speaking through the Pythia re-
quires no such niceties. Neither does Heraclitus when he takes aim at
Homer, Archilochus and Pythagoras, or his audience for their inability to
understand what he says. Heraclitus has a distinctly authoritative oracular
stance which found its most well-known and unimpeachable expression in
the Pythia at Delphi. Moreover, the Pythia articulates an almost knowable
divine knowledge in order to claim authority. Heraclitus similarly posits a
possible human knowledge in a parallel manner. The assertion of the pos-
sibility of knowledge is the basis of each one’s claim to authority. Each
recognizes that what blocks access to the possible knowledge they offer is
the shortcomings of their listeners and each implies that they and their

78 Poster 2006: 2.
79 Robb 1994.
82 PW 1, 31, 244, 245, 50, 55. See also PW 7, 24, 41, 93.
There are of course good reasons why Delphi’s influence has been seen only in style. Heraclitus’ sayings and the Delphic corpus are different in many ways. Yet, I propose that there are more similarities than have thus far been recognized, and that the admittedly great differences between them have been accentuated by the presence or absence of a narrative frame. Oracular tales have an internal structure, the announcement of the oracle, and an external dynamic, the interpretative quest of the client, while Heraclitus’ sayings have only the internal structure – they lack interpretations provided by ancient auditors, though not ancient commentators. In oracular tales, one cannot avoid the likes of Croesus. Through his plight, one senses the activity of a historian who must follow clues in order to understand events in ways that seem plausible and even inevitable. The question of contingency and causality is at the heart of history writing and at the heart of divination, and no historian wants to follow Croesus’ example. Thus, one must supplant Croesus and other such obtuse Delphic clients and present these tales not as worthy of an exegesis comparable to Croesus’, but as propaganda and/or ritual to be painstakingly pulled apart and then reassembled correctly, that is, in historically reasonable ways. It is no wonder that the speculative nature of these tales and their oracles is occluded. It stymies historical analysis of the facts of the matter.

On the other hand, when reading Heraclitus, the Ephesians whom Heraclitus thinks should all be hung for their stupidity, occupy a far less significant place in Heraclitus’ works and so modern exegeses speculate about the meaning of Heraclitus’ words uninhibited by an incompetent alter ego. This state of affairs need not imply that the Pythia’s oracles were not also domains of intellectual speculation, whose form, content and tone inspired Heraclitus. On the contrary, Heraclitus and Delphi participated in and shared compositional techniques, acoustic elements that served as mnemonic devices as Greece moved from oral poetry to orational prose, as well as metaphors typical of riddles, all of which generated questions about how words mean. More precisely, Heraclitus borrowed from Delphi more than just a style because the Delphic tradition had more than a just style to emulate. The Pythia’s authoritative stance conjured by her use of oral technopaegnia compelled listeners, of whom Heraclitus might be counted, to consider how words might or might not correspond to the world, and how

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83 I borrow the phrase “domains of intellectual speculation” from Sally Humphries (2004), who interrogates whether it is appropriate to understand Greek religious practices as solely or primarily practices, and not rather as forms of intellectual speculation.
language in its polyvalence might occlude the divine and hidden structure of the world in its present, past and future dimensions.

Bibliography

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