

A Coarse Pun in Homer? (*Il.* 15.467, 16.120)

Some have detected coarse puns in Idomeneus' words to Meriones in *Iliad* 13.288-91¹):

εἶ περ γάρ κε βλεῖο πονεύμενος ἠὲ τυπείης
οὐκ ἄν ἐν ἀνχέν' ὄπισθε πέσοι βέλος οὐδ' ἐνὶ νώτῳ
ἀλλὰ κεν ἦ στέρνων ἦ νηδύος ἀντιάσειε 290
πρόσσω ἰεμένοιο μετὰ προμάχων ὄριστύν.

In his notes on 275-94 and 290-1, R. Janko follows up a suggestion of Eustathius in arguing that Homer indulges here in “a mildly ribald *double entendre*” and “coarse but playful imagery”, as he describes a spear “seeking a breast or belly”, while Meriones is to seek an “amorous encounter” (the primary meaning of ὄριστύν) with the enemy. Although one reviewer has expressed disbelief²), there are quite a number of ambiguous words in the passage, and the idea is certainly tempting, if not compelling³).

However that may be, it seems odd that another and, in my view, more plausible instance of a coarse pun in the *Iliad* has been either missed or dismissed by modern commentators. In 15.467-70, when Teukros' bowstring breaks, he says to Aias:

ὦ πόποι ἦ δὴ πάγχυ μάχης ἐπὶ μήδεα κείρει
δαίμων ἡμετέρης ὃ τέ μοι βιὸν ἔκβαλε χειρός
νευρὴν δ' ἐξέρρηξε νεόστροφον ἦν ἐνέδησα
πρώϊον ὄφρ' ἀνέχοιτο θαμὰ θρώσκοντας ὄιστούς. 470

Just a few hundred lines later (16.119-21), Homer uses the same formula of Aias himself, when Hektor hacks off the point of his spear as he defends the ships:

γυνῶ δ' Αἴας κατὰ θυμὸν ἀμύμονα ρίγησέν τε
ἔργα θεῶν ὃ ῥα πάγχυ μάχης ἐπὶ μήδεα κείρε 120
Ζεὺς ὑψιβρεμέτης Τρώεσσι δὲ βούλετο νίκην·

As Janko puts it, in his note on the second passage:

¹ Homer is quoted from T. W. Allen (ed.), *Homeri Ilias* (Oxford, 2 vols., 1931), Eustathius from M. Van der Valk (ed.), *Eustathii archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes* (Leiden, 4 vols., 1971-87). References to ‘Janko’ are to R. Janko (ed.), *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume IV, Books 13-16* (Cambridge, 1990).

² M. M. Willock, *CR* 43 (1993), 1-3, at 3.

³ Besides the breast and belly in 290 and ὄριστύν in 291, Janko also finds double meanings in ἀντιάσειε (290, not otherwise used with an inanimate object), τυπείης (288) and (after Eustathius) μῆγεμαι (286).

“Like Teukros, Aias shivers when he recognizes divine intervention cutting off his options as sharply as Hektor cut off his spearhead (Eustathius 1049.24 noted the witty metaphor).”

I do not think it is going too far to suggest that there is also a sexual pun in the formula ἐπὶ μῆδεα κείρει/κεῖρε, and that we should take μῆδεα in both passages as meaning not only ‘plans, counsels’ (Janko’s “options”, *LSJ*⁹ s.v. μῆδος A) but also ‘genitals’ (*LSJ*⁹ s.v. μῆδος B)⁴). It hardly takes a Freudian analyst to notice the similarity between castration and having one’s spear-point chopped off⁵). The resemblance to the snapping of a bowstring may be less obvious to the modern reader, but the *tertium comparationis* is clear enough: each involves a physical break or cut leading to a state of limpness and uselessness, in which the organ or tool is incapable of discharging its projectile, so to speak. The evidence for νεῦρον = ‘penis’ is much later than Homer⁶), but the existence of the same metaphor in Latin *neruus* suggests that the comparison may be very old. The fact that ancient bowstrings were made of animal-tendons would have helped to make the comparison a natural one.

In the *Iliad*, μῆδεα are always ‘plans’ or ‘counsels’, but they are ‘genitals’ as early as the *Odyssey*, in which two of the four instances (18.87 and 22.476 — the others are 6.129 and 18.67) refer specifically to castration. In the *Theogony*, which can hardly be much later than either *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, Hesiod uses a less obvious pun on μῆδος B and μειδιάω in his explanation of Aphrodite’s epithet φιλομμειδῆς or φιλομμηδῆς (*Th.* 200)⁷), a passage which is also very much concerned with castration and its consequences.

Although Janko does not mention it and I had already written the preceding paragraphs before I discovered it myself, Eustathius suggests just this pun in his note on the second of my two passages (3.818.15-20, *ad* Π 119-21: the square brackets mark the author’s second thoughts):

⁴ In my opinion, the two passages support each other, though the second is the clearer of the two, as evidenced by the fact that Eustathius recognizes a pun only there: more on this below.

⁵ I use the word ‘castration’ loosely here, to mean not the surgical removal of the testicles (bilateral orchidectomy) but the unsurgically imprecise chopping off of the entire male sexual apparatus, whose scientific name I do not know. Since it is not a standard medical procedure, it may well not have one.

⁶ *LSJ*⁹ (s.v. νεῦρον V) lists only Plato *Comicus* *Fr.* 173.19 Kock (from the *Phaon*, 189.20 in *PCG* VII) and Galen 8.442. The *PCG* annotation refers in turn to Callimachus, *Fr.* 199.1 Pf.: Pfeiffer notes that the usage is also implied by Aristophanes’ use of the verb νευρόω in *Lys.* 1078, where it is clearly explained by the scholiast.

⁷ For the spelling-problem, cf. M. L. West (ed.), *Hesiod, Theogony* (Oxford, 1966), 88.

Τὸ δὲ μάχης μήδεα κείρεσθαι δύναται ποτε ἀστείως ἀρμόσαι καὶ τινι ἐπιβούλῳ
 εὐνουχιζομένῳ διὰ κινδύνου φόβον. ἐπεὶ μήδεα οὐ τὰ βουλευόμενα μόνον ἀλλὰ
 καὶ τὰ τῶν ἀρρένων αἰδοῖα, τὰ καὶ μέζεα καθ' Ἡσίοδον. [Ἐῖη δ' ἂν προσφυῆς τῷ
 πατραλοῖα Δὶ προσριφῆναι ὡς ἐν σχεδιασμῷ αὐτομάτως τὸ κείρειν μήδεα μάχης
 ὡς | οἷα τεχνίτη τοῦ κείρειν μήδεα, ἐπεὶ καὶ τὰ τοῦ πατρὸς Κρόνου δρεπάνη
 ἀπήραξε.]

In glossing Eustathius' gloss, Van der Valk notes that the worthy bishop would like to believe that the pun is inadvertent:

“Caute tamen loquitur, quia de Homero summo poeta agit. Qua de causa dicit poetam rem ὡς ἐν σχεδιασμῷ αὐτομάτως praebuisse, i.e. poeta non consulto delapsus est ad huiusmodi res nimis obscenas et sordidas commemorandas.”

It may be at least partly Eustathius' embarrassing lapse in attributing the divine castration to Zeus rather than Kronos that causes scholars to disbelieve him on the other point.

One complication remains to be considered. I have suggested, contra Eustathius, that these two passages contain a conscious rather than an unconscious pun, and we may well ask whose consciousness is involved. It is certainly odd that the pun would be Teukros' in the first passage, Homer's in the second. However, it is easy enough to take the second passage as expressing Aias' punning thoughts in Homer's narration. This would be an unusually bold instance of narrative focalization, which does not usually extend to second-hand puns. Finally, whether my proposed pun should be treated as a possible supporting parallel to Janko's or an alternative candidate for the position of ribald pun in Homer depends, I suppose, on how one feels about Janko's — and mine⁸).

⁸ I wish to thank the editor for his suggestions, especially for correcting an error that would be more embarrassing if anyone else knew of it.