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Reading the Birds: Oionomanteia in Early Epic

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The importance of bird divination as represented in early Greek epic has been emphasized by scholars at least since the fundamental study of Bouche-Leclercq and has recently received a renewed and welcome attention. The methodological framework of the majority of this scholarship has been primarily historical and has utilized the literary and the historical evidence for bird divination as if they derived from a common heritage. Homer, it has been said, gives us a fully constituted—which is to say, historical—picture of bird divination. Earlier scholarship is surely correct to have viewed epic as at times containing accurate representations of bird divination, but there are several ominous bird appearances in Homer with no parallel in the historical record. Moreover, the relationship between early epic and archaic history is too uncertain to claim a continuum of conceptual development or transformation in this divinatory technique between the eighth and fifth centuries, as some scholars have done. Homeric bird divination draws upon history, but in many respects its primary aim is “literary.” On the other hand, it would also be incorrect to dismiss bird divination in Homer as contrived without acknowledging that there are significant parallels with the technique as it was actually practiced in the Classical period.

In the present paper I propose to depart from this evolutionary historical trend by stressing above all the rhetorical uses to which bird divination is put.
in early Greek epic—notably in Homer and Hesiod—leaving aside questions of historical accuracy or development per se. Historical examples of bird divination cannot be completely overlooked in a discussion of this kind, as the convergences and incongruities that we find in this regard between early epic and history can lend insight into the rhetorical aims of epic. In particular, I aim to move beyond the commonplace observation that bird oracles are merely signposts for the plot of epic and explore first how the interpretation and reception of bird oracles raise questions of power and authority as they are constituted through a privileged discourse. As I will show, these rhetorical features have distinct ethnographic parallels. Second, I aim to show that early epic moves beyond ethnography by staging oracular discourse itself as a model for how an external audience should interpret the larger narrative. In this sense, early epic can be seen internally to enact its own performance while externally to structure its audience’s response.

There are many birds in early epic that relay divine messages, but the most frequently used term for the oracular bird is οἰωνός.\(^6\) It means both a bird of prey, especially in its capacity as a vehicle for omens, as well as "omen" more generally.\(^7\) From this noun derives the nonepic verb οἰωνίζομαι "to divine from omens,"\(^8\) which betrays in its formation that the more general concept developed from the specific one of taking bird omens. It is not entirely clear why birds of prey were the preferred (but not exclusive) vehicles of divine knowledge, though at least one scholar\(^9\) has argued for a connection between their desire for meat and the more prominent Greek practice of ἱεροσκοπία, that is extispicy or the reading of entrails.\(^10\) This is an attractive idea, except that early epic nowhere alludes to the practice of entrail reading,\(^11\) limiting itself instead to divination by birds, dreams, and meteorological phenomena. When early epic does specify the activity of divination, it often employs the verb μαντεύομαι,\(^12\) from μάντης.\(^13\) In epic the μάντης is in turn often made equivalent to the bird diviner per se, the

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6. For etymology, see Chantraine (1968-80) and Frisk (1954-73) s.v. οἰωνός. Both derive the noun from an Indo-European root attested in Latin avis. There is no linguistic support for the derivation of οἰωνός from οἶος, as in Bouche-Leclercq (1879) 1.129 n. 3. For the range of early epic attestations, see Nordheider (1999).

7. An early example of the latter meaning can be found at Hesiod, Works and Days 801, where it is not clear (as West [1978] ad 801 maintains) that the expression οἰωνός νύσσα, with reference to preparation for marriage, means bird omen specifically. Later examples in LSJ s.v. οἰωνός III. The term ὄρις, which covers a wider range of birds and is also used in contexts of bird omen, never came to mean omen more generally. See Stockinger (1959) 154.

8. See LSJ s.v. οἰωνίζομαι. Plato’s (Phaedrus 244c-d) connection of οἰωνιστική with σήμας is entirely idiosyncratic.


10. Cf. Hesychius, s.v. οἰωνός σαρκοφάγα δρῦς καὶ πάντα, γυναι, κόρακες, εἰρήνης δὲ οἰωνό, δὲν οἰωνίζομαι τὰ μελλόντα, δὲν καὶ οἰωνιστόλοι οἱ μάντεις. . .

11. The key term here is θυσικός (H. 24.221, Od. 21.145, 22.318, 321), which Burckert (1985) 113 and Nilsson (1955) 167 take to be an allusion to entrail reading. Instead, I agree with West (1997) 46 that the early sense of the term refers to a specialist who reads incense smoke. The activities of the θυσικός are nowhere specified in Homer.

12. E.g., ll. 2.300, 16.859, 19.420, etc. Cf. the verb θεσπροφέα "to prophesy," which only appears in the masculine participle in Homer, as at ll. 1.109 and Od. 2.184.

13. For an overview of the μάντης in general, see Parker (1999).
or fulguration

includes the reading of entrails

practices on the other hand, Cicero divides the (professional) practice of divination into two groups

...erview sidesteps what lies at the heart of any divinatory event, namely the process of interpretation. Xenophon seems to take for granted that whatever the gods indicate will be correctly deciphered, yet both Greeks and Romans were well aware that any divine sign could have multiple and varied interpretations.

In his extensive and academic discussion of Greek and Roman divinatory practices on the other hand, Cicero divides the (professional) practice of divination into two groups (De Divinatione 1.6). The first depends on *ars* and includes the reading of entrails (*extispicum*), the interpretation of signs (*monstra*) or fulguration (*fulgura*), and more generally includes the pronounce-

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14. E.g., *Il. 2.858, 13.70, 17.218, [Hesiod], Shield i85.  
15. E.g., *Il. 6.76 of Helenos.  
ments of augures, astrologi, and lots (sortes). The second type of divination depends on natura and includes the interpretation of dreams and the revelations of divinely inspired prophets (vaticinatio). With regard to the first type of divination in particular, Cicero explains elsewhere that it is not so much that given events themselves are portentous, rather "once they have happened, then they are made subject to prophecy by some interpretation" (quaecum facta sunt, tum ad coniecturam\textsuperscript{19} aliqua interpretaione revocantur, De Divinatione 2.31; cf. 1.33). Since we (as Cicero) are concerned with portents that do not merely signal the presence of divinity, but rather with those that ratify a particular course of action (De Divinatione 2.38), then we must focus as much on the underlying system of the portents as on the interpretatio of the diviner.

When we do this, we will see that divination relies on a discourse not between the gods and the diviner (as Xenophon had claimed) but between the diviner and his audience. The rhetorical effectiveness of this discourse—in sum, the ability of the diviner to persuade his audience to pursue a given course of action—can be explained in terms of the intersection of various structures of power and authority that constitute it. But discourse does not happen in the abstract: for example, the same interpretation of a portentous event by a professional and a layman may lead to belief in the one, disbelief in the other. So we must ask further how given individuals are vested with the authority to interpret omens, and thereby to communicate their interpretations authoritatively to their audience. This is a more complicated question than it may at first seem. In Homeric epic, for instance, it is not just a matter of a professional diviner who is consulted for his interpretation of an omen. His judgment can often be overruled or forgotten. Moreover, as we will see below, the whole dynamic of a prophecy can change when it is remembered by someone else; the question then becomes on whose authority the reinterpretation of an omen rests. It may be more accurate to speak of rhetorics of divination, which can be differently figured at different moments, rather than to attempt to reduce a divinatory performance to one unchanging constellation of factors.

Recent research on divination in contemporary African cultures has elucidated many underlying and commonplace structures with exceptional clarity, and I single out here for mention only two observations that can be applied to the ancient world and to early epic. The first is that divination shifts the sympathies and antipathies, everything about them that is used in divination—is "nonnormal" in the same sense that the poison, termite, and wood...
oracles used by the Zande to diagnose a problem and determine a course of action are so. 21 There is no intrinsic or “normal” connection between the decision of an army to advance and the appearance of an eagle or hawk in the sky. In the case of Greece and early epic, the animal kingdom offers an especially telling example of a nonnormal mode of cognition because it is further laden with ethical implications for human behavior. In the Works and Days of Hesiod, wherein there is much instruction about bird divination and which was followed by a treatise entitled Ὄρνιθομαιντεια, 22 the poet says explicitly that Zeus arranged law (νόμος) for human beings, while fish, beasts, and winged birds of prey (οὐρωνοι πετευμοι) eat one another because there is no justice (δικη) among them (276-78). The animal world thus offers an ethically mirrored grid on which any interpreter of an omen must necessarily place his own construction. As we will see, this has far-reaching implications for the interpretation of individual avian phenomena, where, for example, a given pattern, say, of a hawk attacking a dove, nightingale, or other defenseless bird, may be construed in exactly opposite ways depending on circumstances.

A corollary to the establishment of a nonnormal mode of cognition in divination is that this mode is then mediated and synthesized with the “normal” mode to create a solution to the problem at hand. 23 This can happen by assigning symbolic values to whatever the nonnormal grid happens to be, such as when (in an example to be discussed below) Kalkhas interprets a serpent as the Achaean host and the nine sparrows it kills as the nine years it will take them before they can defeat the Trojans in the tenth year (Iliad 2.326-29). Yet even when participants may acquiesce in shifting to a nonnormal mode of cognition, it is in the processes of mediation and synthesis where we find the vested structures of power that must be present to authorize the oracular reading. Without collective subscription to those structures, as constituted both in general and at the given moment, the interpretation will fail to persuade. Homeric poetry shows itself remarkably aware of this problem when, after the ominous appearance of two eagles (Odyssey 2.146-54), whose behavior is negatively applied to the fate of the suitors by Halitherses, the suitor Eurymakhos acidly replies that “many birds wander about under the sun’s rays, but not all of them are fateful” (ὅρνιθες δέ τε πολλοί ὑπ’ αὐγάς ήδειο / φοιτώσ’ , οὔδέ τε πάντες έναίσιμοι, Odyssey 2.181-82). This statement is remarkable because typically the appearance of an eagle, especially as it is about to attack another animal, is always fateful (e.g., Iliad 10.308-10, 12.201-03, Odyssey 19.536-39:

21. The classic account of Zande oracles remains that of Evans-Pritchard (1937), to which a great deal of contemporary anthropological research on divination is still indebted.
22. In the scholia vetera of the Works and Days, it is reported that a work entitled Ὄρνιθομαιντεια followed line 828, and that Apollonius of Rhodes athetized it. See Pertusi (1955) ad 828a. This may be related to the ἐπι μαυτικα ἐξηγήσεις ἕτε τέρσαν mentioned in connection with Hesiod by Pausanias (9.31.5). See further West (1978) 46, 64, 364-65 ad 828.
23. Peek (1991) 197-98. On p. 198 Peek writes, “It might be said that divination creates a dialectic in order to accomplish the necessary synthesis which is the solution to the problem brought to the diviner.”
Penelope’s dream). More importantly, in other contexts the appearance of an eagle by itself means that Zeus has granted his approval to an imminent action (as at *Iliad* 24.315). Indeed birds rarely appear in Homeric poetry that do not have oracular significance. Eurymakhos does not just disagree with the particular interpretation of the omen by Halitherses, he claims that some birds lack any oracular significance at all. Of course there are reasons of plot for Eurymakhos’ disbelief in the interpretation of this particular omen (he is a doomed suitor; Odysseus will return, as Halitherses uses the omen to predict), yet his near denial of the whole system of bird divination testifies in a more striking way to how Homeric poetry represents him as unwilling to participate in the authorized discourse.

The second observation made by anthropologists studying contemporary African divination that we can apply to early epic concerns what has been termed the reality-defining potential of oracular discourse. The “truth” of divination in this sense refers to its performative, and performable, efficacy. Truth or social reality is thus constituted in the successful act of divination. As a rule, bird divination in early epic is premised on the notion that bird activity can reveal a deeper level of truth about human behavior. Once this level of truth has been successfully accessed, as in the example of Halitherses just cited, it still has no value unless the reading can be “performed” effectively to shape the experience of the participants. The degree of this shaping for a given community can be gauged by how public the divination event is. For example, most but not all bird omens in early epic presuppose a public, and occasionally legalistic, venue internal to the narrative; their degree of ratification is therefore deeper than omens that are only subject to private experience and interpretation. Once human beings and their actions have been reinterpreted through divination, “publicly reclassified” as it were, a new version of events emerges to affirm what participants see as more fundamental or more meaningful truths. To paraphrase the words of another anthropologist, public divination allows a community to recreate itself as its members ideally see it, unified and single in its intentions, and thereby produces a heightened sense of community.

When divination is conceived as a performed rhetoric that reshapes events as the diviners intended them to have been, we can also see how oracular (re)interpretation moves both forward and backward in time. Divination allows past events to be reconfigured to present communal intentions and aims, while present events can be recalibrated in the light of past experience and made pregnant with future intentions. A particularly relevant example of

24. Cf. the birds and pigeons at *Od* 12.62; however, even these are said to bring ambrosia to Zeus.
26. Of course all of early epic presupposes an even wider external (listening, reading) audience for whom the omens have value.
27. Shaw (1991) 140.
28. Lienhardt (1961) 250, on Dinka ceremonial speeches, which he himself compares to prophecies on p. 251.
this can be found in the presentation of Kalkhas' prophecy in the council scene in \textit{Iliad} 2. The omen at issue is not strictly a bird omen, but it does involve birds as well as a serpent. The Achaeans have been assembled because of the dream (in the guise of Nestor) sent by Zeus to Agamemnon on the previous night to encourage him with the deception of victory to arm his men and attack Troy (2.20-34). Agamemnon’s own \textit{diápeira} of his men has persuaded many of them to abandon camp and depart for their ships, with the result that Thersites makes his abusive outburst and is then forcibly stripped by Odysseus of his right to speak in the assembly. In this uncertain mood, Odysseus sympathizes with the impatience of his fellow warriors and then recalls the omen and prophecy of Kalkhas at Aulis (\textit{Iliad} 2.303-10):

\begin{quote}
χθιζά τε καὶ πρωξίζ', ὅτ' ἐσ' Ἀὐλίδα νῆς Ἀχαιῶν

ηγερέθουτο κακά Πρίαμῳ καὶ Τροϊς φέρουσαι,

ἡμεῖς δ' ἀμφὶ περὶ κρήνην ἱεροὺς κατὰ βωμοὺς

ἐρῳμεν ἀδανάτοις τελησάσας ἐκατόμβας,

καλὴ ὑπὸ πλατάνιστῳ, ὀθεὶ δέν αὐγάλαι ὄδωρ·

ἐνθ' ἐφανοί μέγα οὐμαμ ἐράκων ἐπὶ νώτα βασιλιῶν,

εὐραλέος, τὸν β' αὐτὸς 'Ολύμπιος ἤκε φῶσῳδε,

βωμοῦ ὑπαίζασα πρὸς ρα πλατάνιστον ὅροσειν.

Just yesterday and before when the ships of the Achaean were gathered at Aulis bringing hardships to Priam and the Trojans, around a spring at holy altars we were making perfect sacrifices to the immortals, under a beautiful plane tree, where bright water flowed: there a great sign appeared: a serpent, blood-red on its back, horrible, which the Olympian himself sent forth, darting out from the altar it rushed toward the plane tree.

I have cited this much of the background text to convey the full force of Odysseus’ narrative. We may first note how the bucolic sacrifice is abruptly disturbed by the sudden appearance of the blood-red snake from under the altars, an event unusual enough to be marked as a sign (σῆμα),\textsuperscript{29} an omen, by Odysseus. But whether this is actually \textit{propter hoc} or \textit{post hoc}, which is a distinction that Cicero made (\textit{De Divinatione} 2.31, above), we do not know. Odysseus also proleptically gives an interpretation of the serpent as sent by Zeus, which, we will not discover for several more lines, was actually Kalkhas’ \textit{coniectura}. In any case, the narrative continues (2.311-17):

\begin{quote}
ξυθά δ' ἐσαν στρουθοῦ ἁυσόσι, νῆτα τέκνα,

δίδω ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ, πετάλοις ὑποπεπτητάτατε,

ὀκτώ, ἀτάρ μητὴρ ἐνάτη ἤν, ἢ τέκνα τέκνα.

ἐνθ' δ' γε τοὺς ἱλεινά καθηδίε τετριγωταῖς,

μήτηρ δ' αἱμποτάτῳ ὀδυρομένη φίλα τέκνα,

τὴν δ' ἑλειζόμενος πτέρυγος λάβεν ἀμφισχυζαν,

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ κατὰ τέκνα φάγε στρουθοῖ καὶ αὐτίν.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} The semantics of σῆμα in Homeric poetry have been outlined by Nagy (1990a).
where were the young of a sparrow, innocent children, crouching under the leaves of the outermost branch, eight of them, and the ninth was the mother who bore the young. There the snake devoured them as they twittered pitifully; And the mother, grieving her dear children, fluttered about it; and the snake, coiling, grabbed her by the wing as she shrieked. Then it ate up the young of the sparrow and their mother.

In this passage Odysseus places emphasis for rhetorical effect on the innocent nature of the sparrow’s young, using the highly evocative phrase νήπια τέκνα, which is just as often used of human children. In terms of the anthropological models of divination outlined earlier, Odysseus has effected a synthesis or mediation between the nonnormal animal world and the human one through his use of νήπια τέκνα. We certainly expect a comparison between the animal and human worlds, as is typical of Homeric similes, but the divinatory interpretation of this event requires Odysseus rhetorically to equate the two. Comparison by itself is inadequate.

What follows confirms that a divine hand was at work in producing the entire event (2.318-20):

τὸν μὲν ἄριζηλον ἢκεν θεός, ὡς περ ἐφηνεν: λάμψ γὰρ μὴν ἔβηκε Κρόνου παῖς ἄγκυλομῆτεω. ἦμεν δ’ ἐστασότες θαυμάζομεν οἷον ἐτύχθη.

The very god who made the snake appear made it a monument, for the son of Kronos of the crooked counsel turned it to stone and we standing around marvelled at what had happened.

By explicitly attributing the appearance of the snake to Zeus, we again have Odysseus here giving proleptically to his audience what we will learn was ultimately Kalkhas’ interpretation of the omen. Similarly, the wonder produced by the snake suddenly turning to stone has also been cast by Kalkhas (as we will learn) as evidence of the working of Zeus, which allows in turn a deeper significance to be given to the whole event.

But at this point it is not enough for Odysseus to continue recalling his own memory of the event, and he will now quote Kalkhas’ prophecy at the time (2.323-29), which we can summarize. The eight sparrow nestlings and their mother make a total of nine, which Kalkhas interpreted to mean that it will take the Achaeans nine years of fighting before they can take the citadel of Troy in the tenth. Odysseus then confirms that indeed all is coming to pass as Kalkhas foretold, when he caps the quote with τά δή νῦν πάντα τελείται (2.330). This is a good example of how a past prophecy, given nine years previously when the Achaeans were at Aulis, can be remembered and realigned in terms of present events. However, what is most striking of all is that apart

30. Reading ἄριζηλον with the vulgate (and/or ἄριζηλον with Zenodotus), but not ἄριζηλον with Aristarchus, on the grounds that Zeus would not make the snake disappear and then turn it to stone. I note with interest, however, that Cicero (De Divinatione 2.30.64 Ἀρ) knew the Aristarchean version: he reports for lines 318-19 qui luci ediderat genitor Saturnius idem, abdulit et duro formavit tegmine saxi. For the same reason I also accept line 319 against Aristarchus’ athetesis.
from Odysseus’ quotation of Kalkhas, which we have no way of knowing is accurate, this entire recollection belongs to Odysseus, who is not a seer, and not to Kalkhas. Odysseus is relying upon his own credibility and persuasiveness as a speaker in the assembly and more importantly is relying on the credibility of Kalkhas as a diviner to rally the Achaeans at the present moment. Their cheers (2.333) at the conclusion of his speech suggest that he succeeds.

In De Divinatione, Cicero draws specific attention to this entire divinatory episode in Homer in terms of what we might call its rationalist dimensions. He asks, for example, how Kalkhas deduced years rather than months or days from the number of sparrows; or why the prophecy is based on the sparrow nestlings rather than on the serpent being turned to stone (all featured at 2.30.65). For Cicero, there appears to be no intrinsic connection between sparrows and years, and so he concludes (after recounting the story of the serpent that appeared to Sulla while he was offering sacrifices, 2.30.65) that the resultant military success (of Sulla, with that of the Greeks against the Trojans implied) was due not to the judgment of the diviner (haruspicis consilium), but to the skill of military leadership. In this respect Cicero could be said to be a forerunner of the intellectualist school of anthropologists who study divination, who approach the processes of divination in terms of assumptions drawn from Western science. 31 Divination is explained in terms of failed science, and less attention is paid to the symbolic and structural/functional frameworks in which it is configured. We can restate Cicero’s concerns in a different way: the issue is not whether there is any real science or ratio behind Kalkhas’ divination (and Odysseus’ recollection of it), but rather how the discourse of divination is made effective for a given audience at a given moment.

In other words, we must see that Odysseus successfully performs the rhetoric of a prophecy for the Achaeans, which in turn Kalkhas had performed at an earlier time. As already noted, we have no way of knowing whether Odysseus’ recollection of events was accurate, even if we may surmise that some of the emotional coloring he gives to the event is of his own devising. Nor do we know for sure whether his quotation of Kalkhas is exact, but none of this is terribly important. What is important is that Odysseus has the rhetorical and performative authority at this moment to enable the Achaeans to envision themselves in the omen (the switch to the nonnormal mode of cognition) at Aulis, and then to emerge from that recollection back into the world of the here and now (the synthesis or mediation) on the Trojan shores, nine years into battle, invested with a new significance. The prophecy allows them to see themselves as they would ideally like to, which means to see themselves engaged in an ultimately successful mission that has been confirmed by Zeus himself. As Oliver Taplin has correctly observed about this scene, by interpreting the omen in terms of the Διὸς βουλή, “the reconstruction of the past reaches forward to the present and even into the

31. A brief overview of this and other schools can be found in Shaw (1991) 137-39.
future."  

This it certainly does, and at the same time it reinforces the Achaeans’ own sense of community and collective enterprise. What is significant about a public divination, in this case one that is doubly performed, first by Kalkhas and then nine years later by Odysseus, is not whether it is “right” in some objective sense, but only whether the community as a whole agrees to accede to the constructed truth.

There is a good deal more involving prophecy that can be said about this counsel scene, but I will limit myself only to one further point. After Odysseus finishes, the venerable Nestor berates those Achaeans who would leave before knowing for themselves the truth of Zeus’ intentions (Iliad 2. 346-49). He then reinforces the import of Odysseus’ speeches with his own version of what happened after the Achaeans left Aulis. Meteorological phenomena, Nestor declares, prove that Zeus backs their efforts (2.350-53):

πολ πολισ οὖν κατανεύσαι ὑπερμενέα Κρονίωνα

 metam τού ὅτε μισίν ὀκυτόροισιν ἔβισιν

Ἀργείων Τρώωσα φόνου καὶ ἦσα ἡμέρον

ἀπτράπτων ἐπιδείξα, ἐναίσιμα σήματα φαινών.

For I declare that the all-powerful son of Kronos nodded in assent on the day when the Argives went on fast-sailing ships bringing bloodshed and death to the Trojans, flashing lightning on the right, showing fateful signs.

Just as Odysseus performed Kalkhas’ prophecy, Nestor now performs his own. Again it is important to stress that we have no way of proving the “truth” of Nestor’s claims—indeed, he describes the appearance of the favorable signs (ἐναίσιμα σήματα) of lightning as if this was something only he was privileged to see. I will deal in a moment with the negative symbolism of left and the positive symbolism of right in Greek divination, as well as with those oracular signs which any nonspecialist could understand. For now, I want only to stress that the Achaeans must rely on Nestor’s credibility as an aged and wise counselor in order to remain convinced of the divine ratification of their efforts. And of course they do, as the approval of Agamemnon and the assembled Achaeans proves.  

But something else happened in the course of Nestor’s performance: if indeed he was the only one to see the lightning flashes on the day of departure, then he has taken a private divinatory experience from memory and made it public. Not everyone (even in early epic) can do this, and we have already seen how the interpretations of specialized seers like Halitherses, in the face of omens that all can see, can nevertheless be denied. Whatever actually happened on the day the Achaeans sailed for Troy is simply less relevant than Nestor’s reconstruction of that day, but it is Nestor’s character, social stature, and rhetorical competence  that truly makes his performance effective.

33. Note especially Agamemnon’s remark to Nestor at 2.370: ἥ μᾶν αὖτ’ ἀγωρή νικής, γέρον, υἷς Ἀχαιῶν.
34. Nestor’s speeches are discussed in detail by Martin (1989) 106-10.
Bird divination in early epic depends upon the flight patterns, cries, and behavior of birds in what by the Classical period is explicitly designated as a τέχνη.\(^{35}\) It was surely a specialized skill from its earliest inception in Greece, much like that of ἱεροσκόπτια or extispicy, which, like bird divination,\(^{36}\) was derived from Near Eastern practices.\(^{37}\) However, unlike the former, in early epic at least bird divination is presented as a field open to nonprofessional interpreters. A specialist such as Kalkhas or Theoklymenos may have been called upon if available to render a more accurate reading,\(^{38}\) but lay persons could also deduce consequences for their own future from bird omens. By contrast, the mythological tradition (although later) suggests that the earliest practitioners of bird divination—the generation which included Melampus and Mopsus—were invested with the ability through a special dispensation. In the usual version, a serpent was said to have licked their ears, thus giving them the ability to understand the language of birds.\(^{39}\)

In Homeric epic, the central orientation for an individual engaged in reading bird flight appears to be north, hence to his right (δεξιά) will be east where lies the dawn and sun, while to his left (ἀριστερά) lies west and murky darkness (Iliad 12.239-40). A bird that appears on the right therefore is favorable, while unfavorable if on the left. This northerly orientation, however, is often left unstated in Homeric representations of bird flight, and what becomes important is only whether the bird appears to the right or left of the observer.\(^{40}\) So Hekabe, in a bid to get Priam to seek Zeus’ confirmation for his proposed mission to the Achaeans to retrieve Hektor’s body, asks him to pour a libation to Zeus and (Iliad 24.292-95):

ατει δ’ οἰωνόν, ταχύν διγγελον, ὡς τ’ ο’ αυτῷ φιλτατος οἰωνόν, καὶ εὖ κράτος ἐστί μέγιστον, δεξιόν, δόρα μιν αὐτὸς ἐν ὀρθαλμοίς νόησας τῷ πίσωνος ἐπὶ νήσας ἵς Δαναῶν παρυπωλῶν.

seek a bird of omen, a swift messenger, which is the dearest of birds to him, and whose strength is greatest, rightward, so that after recognizing it yourself in your eyes, you may rely upon it and approach the ships of the swift-horsed Danaans.

35. [Aeschylus], Prometheus Bound 488-92, where the flight pattern (πτήσις), habitat (δίατα), hatreds (ἔθροι), sympathies (συνέργησθα), and seating patterns (συνεδρια) of birds are singled out as significant. See Pollard (1948) 120. The chorus in Aristophanes’ Birds, after declaring itself the Ammon, Delphi, Dodona, and Phoebus Apollo of the Athenians (716), then ridicules (719-21) the absurd lengths to which professionals might take their art. For a contrasting view of this passage, which does not see cynicism here, see Smith (1989) 148.


39. Halliday (1913) 250. For Melampus, see Apollodorus 1.9.11. For Mopsus, see Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis 1.133. To Kassandra, Helenos, and Teiresias were attributed similar stories, on which see Halliday ibid.

Priam promptly undertakes the libation, yet besides the mention of him standing in the middle of the courtyard when he pours (306) and faces the sky (307), no further indication is given as to the cardinal direction in which he is facing. In short order Zeus recognizes the merit of his prayer and sends an eagle, the "most perfect of birds" (τελειότατον πτερνών, 315) and Zeus' typical avian representative, which appears on the right and flies through the city (319-20). All of the palace staff in attendance on Priam and Hekabe—again the context is public—see the omen and rejoice in the prospect that the mission will be favorable.

A fragmentary inscription from Ephesus (LSAM 30)\textsuperscript{41} in the late sixth or early fifth century confirms that recognizing the directionality in bird flight was public and not specialized knowledge.\textsuperscript{42} Specialized individuals alone might have been entrusted with the taking of bird omens,\textsuperscript{43} but engraving the instructions in marble at least testifies to the need for the Ephesians to codify procedures and thereby to make them publicly known. At the same time, the rules given for the interpretation of bird flight are more complicated than what we find in early epic, although they still follow the same series of right/left binary divisions.

\begin{verbatim}
[- - - - έγ μὲν δεξί-] ης εἰς τὴν ἄριστερὴν πετ-
[όμενος: ἤμι μὲν: ἄποκρύψει-
i, δεξίος: ἤν δὲ: ἐπάρει: τῆ[ν]
[ε]ύωνυμον: πετέρυγα: καῦ
[ἄπα]ρει: καῦ ἄποκρύψει: ε-
[𝑢]ύωνυμος: ἐγ δὲ: τῆς ἄριστ-
[ερῆς] εἰς τὴν δεξίην: πετῶ-
[μ]ένος: ἤμι μὲν: ἰθὺς: ἄποκρ-
[ 않은]: εὑρώνυμος: ἤν δὲ: τῆ-
[δεξίην πετέρυγα: ἐπάρας
[καῦ: ἀπάρας: ἄποκρύψει]
[δεξιός - - - -]

. . . If a bird flying from right to left disappears, it is favorable; but if it raises its left wing, flies away and disappears, it is unfavorable. If a bird flying from left to right disappears on a straight course, it is unfavorable; but if after raising its right wing and flying away it disappears, it is favorable. . . .\textsuperscript{44}
\end{verbatim}

Despite problems with the text, the rules appear fairly simple and correspond to a twofold series of binary division. We have initially the standard left/right division, but then each of these can be qualified if the bird, heading

\textsuperscript{41} Further publication information can be found in Sokolowski (1955) 84.
\textsuperscript{42} Various interpretations of the inscription are summarized in Dillon (1996) 105-06, but my present point only concerns the public nature of the instructions.
\textsuperscript{43} Cf. Pritchett (1979) 103.
\textsuperscript{44} My translation follows those of Sokolowski (1955) 86 and Dillon (1996) 105.
toward the left suddenly reverses back to the right, or heading toward the right (note that in this case it must be heading on a straight course, ἠθός, which already seems to qualify a negative reading) reverses course and heads back to the left. Instructions for the observation of wing position are not attested in early epic, although the dimension and extension of bird wings is occasionally mentioned (as at Iliad 24.317-19 of Priam’s eagle). In effect what this further binary division offers is a substantial qualification of the reading, so that what initially appears positive or negative may also become the opposite. This allows greater flexibility in the system of interpretation, although we do not know if such rules applied to other city-states besides Ephesus. As other scholars have argued, it would seem that the Ephesus inscription presupposes a fixed point of orientation from which to view the birds, but the Greeks never established a templum, or field of vision, as did the Romans in their system of augury. Hence we cannot be certain that even in the case of LSAM 30 a fixed viewpoint is presupposed. The more interesting question is simply why such instructions were inscribed in the first place. We may do no more than speculate, but even if the omen-taking were reserved for a specialized group, the inscription testifies that the rules for interpretation should be intelligible, at least in principle, to all concerned citizens. In my view, we may further suggest that the publication of this rule system must be related in some way to the relatively lower prestige oionomanteia held all over the Greek world in comparison to major oracular sites and extispicy.

The symbolism of left and right (again without a fixed orientation) may or may not be combined in early epic with bird cries to produce readings (cf. Latin oscen). Here early hexameter poetry gives us a mixed picture as to the capabilities necessary to construe the proper message: in some cases, a bird and its cry may be intelligible, even mundanely so, while in others explicit caution is leveled against the misreading of bird utterances. The best known example of this from the Iliad occurs in book 10, just after Odysseus and Diomedes have set out at night for the Trojan camp. We are told by the narrator that Athena sends a heron (ἐπεκδιακός) near the road on the right, although because it is dark they do not see but hear it (10.274-76). Both Odysseus and Diomedes are immediately aware that it signifies the presence of Athena, and so they stop and pray directly to her to ensure their safe passage. This reverses the more common order of events, whereby a prayer for help is first offered at a sacrifice for Herakles. Discussion in Stengel (1902). As with Priam (ὁικίωσεν), it must be heading on a straight course, ἠθός, which already seems to qualify a negative reading) reverses course and heads back to the left. Instructions for the observation of wing position are not attested in early epic, although the dimension and extension of bird wings is occasionally mentioned (as at Iliad 24.317-19 of Priam’s eagle). In effect what this further binary division offers is a substantial qualification of the reading, so that what initially appears positive or negative may also become the opposite. This allows greater flexibility in the system of interpretation, although we do not know if such rules applied to other city-states besides Ephesus. As other scholars have argued, it would seem that the Ephesus inscription presupposes a fixed point of orientation from which to view the birds, but the Greeks never established a templum, or field of vision, as did the Romans in their system of augury. Hence we cannot be certain that even in the case of LSAM 30 a fixed viewpoint is presupposed. The more interesting question is simply why such instructions were inscribed in the first place. We may do no more than speculate, but even if the omen-taking were reserved for a specialized group, the inscription testifies that the rules for interpretation should be intelligible, at least in principle, to all concerned citizens. In my view, we may further suggest that the publication of this rule system must be related in some way to the relatively lower prestige oionomanteia held all over the Greek world in comparison to major oracular sites and extispicy.

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45. According to Plutarch, one omen that foreshadowed the death of Tiberius Gracchus was a mantic bird that lifted its left wing while on the ground (Tiberius Gracchus 17). This, however, occurs in the very different context of the Roman divination system involving the feeding of sacred chickens (on which, see Cicero, De Divinatione 2.34-35).


47. See Bouché-Leclercq (1879) 1.136, and the remarks of Linderski (1986a) 335-38. Substantial further discussion of templum and augural procedures in Linderski (1986a) 2256-96.

48. Cf. the fifth-century dedication at Troezen, SIG 1:159, which commemorates the appearance of a bird (ὄικωσεν) on the left at a sacrifice for Herakles. Discussion in Stengel (1902).

49. As with Priam (II. 24.319-20), or Telemakhos (Od. 15.525-6). In this connection we may compare the doves of Aphrodite that lead her through the mid-air (διὰ τοῦ μεσοῦ, 12) to Sappho in fr.1.9-13 Lobel-Page. Is the orientation through the middle of the upper air, rather than on the right or left, significant?
The signification of bird cries is more generalized in Hesiodic poetry, where their oracular nature is not entirely separable from their role in the cycles of agricultural production. There is even occasional overlapping of terminology for omens and, as in epic, the recognition of bird signs always bears upon imminent action (Works and Days 448-51):

φράζεσθαι δ' ἐστ' ἀν γεράνου φωνήν ἔπακουσας

ψυμβεν ἐκ νεφέων ἐνιαύσια κεκληγυίας.

ἡ τ' ἀρότοιο τε σῆμα φέρει καὶ χειματος ὦρην

δικβέει ὀμβρηνοῦ.

Take note whenever you hear the yearly voice of the

screaming crane from the clouds above,

which brings the sign for plowing and indicates the season

of rainy winter.

I take Hesiod’s marked usage of the oracular terms φράζεσθαι50 and σήμα here not so much as playful or connoting undue seriousness, but rather as an indication of how carefully integrated the avian world is with that of the normal farmer and Greek culture more generally. No special knowledge and skill, such as those of a seer, are required to recognize that the cries of cranes51 are seasonal and herald the onset of autumn. The only conceit is that a farmer should have knowledge of the lore that Hesiod’s poetry conveys. In any event, it is only one among other bird signs that autumn is coming. Earlier Hesiod has already stated that sowing should begin when the Pleiades (Πλημάδες) set (384), while harvest should begin when they rise in the spring (383-84). Despite the objection that Hesiod’s Πλημάδες must have a different etymology from Πελειάδες “Doves,”52 the association of the star cluster with doves (especially as doves fleeing the hunter Orion) is common in early Greek and Classical poetry.53 Hesiod would certainly have been aware of the correspondence.

Similarly, the advent of a new spring is also marked by the appearance of the swallow (χελιδών), “the lamenting daughter of Pandion” (568-69).54 Hesiod’s swallow and the noise it makes bear direct comparison with the only two occurrences of swallows in Homeric epic, both in the Odyssey, which differently but equally portend an imminent change in the course of action for the suitors. In the first instance, Odysseus has just strung his bow

and the swallow appears in a simile (Odyssey 21.410-11):

δεξιτερή δ' ἀρα χειρὶ λαβὼν πειρήσατο νευρῆς

ἡ δ' ὑπὸ καλὸν δείσε. χελιδόνι εἰκέλη αὐθῆν.

50. Some examples of oracular uses of φράζεσθαι are given in West (1978) ad 448.
51. For the simile comparing the noise of amassing Trojans to birds, and especially cranes (Il. 3.1-6; cf. 2.459-65), see Muehlner (1990).
52. West (1978) ad 783-84.
53. Pindar, Nem. 2.11-12 with scholia to Pindar, Nem. 2.17a (Drachmann), Hesiod, fragments 288-90 MW, Il. 18.486, Od. 5. 272-74, Alcman i.60-63 Page, Anacreon 4.9-10, Aeschylus, fr.312 Nauck, Euripides, Or. 1005, and Lamprocles 736 Page. See also the vetera scholia in Pertusi (1955) 131 ad 383c.
54. Cf. the swallow at Sappho fr.135 Lobel-Page with the commentary of West (1978) ad 568.
The positive symbolism of right, which we have already seen in several oιονοματικοι contexts, is here combined with the comparison of the swallow’s voice to produce a latently oracular message. The suitors, of course, at this moment have yet to realize that Odysseus is present but they do realize that events are turning against them, as a great pain seizes them and the color of their skin changes (21.412-13). The message then becomes manifest as Zeus, to confirm what the suitors intuit and the audience already knows, thunders greatly and shows forth signs (σήματα, 21.413). Odysseus rejoices in the divine confirmation and then shoots an arrow seamlessly through the axes, foreshadowing the slaughter of the suitors.

Before the second appearance of a swallow in the Odyssey, Athena has come to Odysseus in the guise of Mentor (22.205-06). When the suitor Agelaos, son of Damastor, sees Mentor, he attempts to persuade him to stand with them as opposed to Odysseus (213-23), in response to which Athena upbraids Odysseus to encourage him to fight (226-35). At this point (22.239-40):

\[
\text{αὐτὴ δὲ αἰθαλόεντος ἀνὰ μεγάροιο μέλαθρον}
\]

\[
\text{ἐζεῖ ἄνακδασσα, χελίδοιν εἰκέλῃ ἀντίνη.}
\]

and she, after leaping upwards sat on a rafter of the smoky hall, in the likeness of a swallow.

We are not told whether Odysseus reacts to the sudden transformation of Athena/Mentor, although Agelaos does notice that Mentor has left, leaving others standing at the doors (249-50). In this case the appearance of the swallow marks the epiphany of Athena, and this is one of several epiphanies of gods in Homeric epic in which they are transformed into birds. For our purposes, there is no reason to distinguish a bird epiphany of a god from an oracular bird, inasmuch as functionally they both signal divine presence and aid. At the same time Athena’s epiphany marks an impending change for the suitors: they will ineffectually cast their spears at Odysseus only to have them deflected by her, after which their own slaughter begins. It may be pressing the comparison to say that the appearance of a new spring represented by the swallow in Hesiod is the only metaphorical image that we should construe in these Odyssean passages. But there are so few species of bird represented in early epic that it seems almost certain that the suggestion, if no more, is present that cleansing the palace on Ithaka heralds the “springtime” of a new royal era.

55. Dirlmeier (1967) argued that bird epiphanies were no different than bird similes and were not meant to be taken literally. His argument centers around Il. 7.59 (Athena and Apollo sit on a branch “like vultures/immersgeyers” ἀγημνόνως), Il. 14.290 (Hypnos sits in a tree “like a clear-voiced bird” δραίως ἀυξυρῆ), Od. 1.319-20 (Athena flies away “like a bird” δραίως, although ἀρναταιες here remains unexplained), Od. 3.371-72 (Athena leaves “like a sea-eagle” φηνι), Od. 5.352-53 (Leukothea dives into the sea “like a gull” αἰθιῶσα), and Od. 22.239-40, cited above. Bushnell (1982) 9 correctly questions Dirlmeier, but seems unaware of the paper by Bannert (1978), who had already refuted Dirlmeier passage for passage on the basis of the frequent mention of wonder induced in the observers of the epiphanies (30-31). Further consideration of bird epiphanies of gods and bird similes in Bannert (1988) 57-68.
For Hesiod, reading the birds is one among many skills that any pious man should have, but by itself it is insufficient to guarantee success. Like Homeric epic, Hesiod’s presentation of augural signs does not presuppose specialized knowledge or capabilities beyond the instruction that Hesiod himself is giving. This accords with Hesiod’s own self-representation generally as a farmer with no special skills suddenly elevated by the Muses to the status of poet and sage. Nevertheless, the successful man must be well versed in traditional lore and remain constantly aware of numerous contingencies. For example, it is just as important for a man building a house not to leave it unfinished, lest a cawing crow perch on it (Works and Days 746-47), as it is for him not to set a wine ladle on top of the wine bowl (744-45) or to draw water from an undedicated cauldron (748-49). When Hesiod says (Works and Days 826-28),

> interpreting the birds and avoiding transgressions.

it is worth stressing  

> that must be kept in mind just as much as “interpreting the birds” and “avoiding transgressions.”

While the potential for error or missteps in planning for the future is in Hesiod spread over an array of factors, a more pointed warning pertaining to the decipherment of bird cries in particular can be found in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. After Apollo and Hermes have reconciled, Apollo warns Hermes not to inquire of him about the designs of Zeus (539-40). He then adds (543-49):

> and he shall have benefit of my oracular voice, whoever comes by means of the voice and flight of birds of sure omen; this man shall have benefit of my oracular voice and ! shall not deceive him. But one who, trusting in idly-chattering birds, desires beyond reason to inquire into my divination, and to perceive more than the eternal gods, will travel in vain, but I will receive his gifts.

57. For the variety of omens, such as bad weather or death, cawing crows presage, see West (1978) ad 747.
This is a remarkable passage both for what it cautions and for the ambivalent relationship Apollo himself has toward bird divination. On the one hand, the warning that a man must correctly distinguish the vain from the significant cries as well as the flight of birds is straightforward.\(^{58}\) It is also quite clear that the oracle of Apollo is here characterized as superior to bird divination, since Apollo advises using it to forecast the appropriate time to visit his own oracle at Delphi. But this must be considered in context: in the course of the hymn, Apollo himself has already used bird divination to confirm that his cattle were stolen by the son of Zeus (213-14). And later, while confronting Hermes about the stolen cattle, Apollo stresses again that he intends to use bird divination specifically to discover the cattle’s whereabouts (302-3). The god who cautions against the incorrect interpretation of birds thus demonstrates how they should be used correctly, but what remains puzzling is why Apollo, the self-declared mouthpiece of Zeus (536-38), needs to divine by the birds—or by any other means, for that matter—at all. He is the only god in early epic who uses bird divination. Because divination by definition is a method of inquiring into the divine will, Apollo should not need to do this both on the grounds that he is a god and \textit{a fortiori} on the grounds that he is the oracular god par excellence. Part of the answer must surely lie in a certain “advertisement” in the hymn of bird divination—here Apollo, master of his own oracle, is demonstrating to the wider Greek audience that the technique can be successful. Yet at the same time, Apollo’s speech, like Hesiod’s advice at the end of the \textit{Works and Days}, builds in a flexible defense mechanism: should an interpretation of a Pythian oracle turn out not to be true, Apollo says in effect, then the reason must lie in earlier, misunderstood (or unseen) bird omens. The inquirer’s bad timing or his desire to know too much (παρεκ νόον), but not the Apolline oracle itself, would then be responsible for the inaccurate prediction. This kind of interdependency among oracular systems, whereby one is used as a check or cross-check against another, is so common in contemporary ethnography as not to need discussion here. For our purposes, the most important point for now is that these oracular systems all require a timely and calibrated ability to read them, and to read them against one another, yet never without the risk of peril.\(^{59}\)

Such is the conceit that early epic can self-consciously deploy to characterize how its own audience should engage with it.\(^{60}\)

One of the most striking ways in which early epic represents bird divination is to use a bird omen to skew an internal character’s perspective from that of the external audience generally. It does this most frequently by presenting certain bird behaviors, rather than just the appearance or call of a bird, as divinatory signs. This is the third type of bird divination in early epic and

\(^{58}\) Cf. Hesiod fr. 240.9-11 MW, where mortals may approach the oracle at Dodona bringing gifts and “in accompaniment with good birds.”


\(^{60}\) This is the central argument of Bushnell’s (1982) article.
arguably the most important, because it is through these often unusual acts that relevant conclusions may be drawn for a situation at hand. In what follows, I would like to defend two propositions: (1) early epic is self-consciously aware that the ambiguities inherent in reading these kinds of bird signs are also present in any interpretation of its narrative advanced by external audiences. And (2), early epic can draw analogies between an internal character’s performed bird divination and its own external performative mode.

As an example of the first proposition, let us look at the well-known fable of the hawk and nightingale in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (202-12) in terms of bird divination. Scholars have long recognized the ambiguous nature of this σῆμα,61 but only rarely has this entire fable been construed as an example of bird divination.62 Yet given Hesiod’s interest in birds, as we have already discussed, there can be no question that the choice of this fable, as opposed to, say, one about a fox and hedgehog, was meant to resonate with the larger avian themes in his work. In Hesiod, the appearance of birds, if interpreted correctly, always signifies either a change of season or the appropriate time for action in life. The fable itself is of course on one level just that, an aTvos, which by definition requires that its audience be capable of deciphering (κρίνω) the correct message.63 Hence Hesiod explicitly directs his aTvos to kings who are “perceptive” (φρονέουσι καὶ σύντοις, 202). However, his innovation here is that he adds another level of complexity by telling a fable that can likewise be understood as an omen (*Works and Days* 203-11):

```
ωδε ἤριξ προσέπεπτεν ἁδόνα ποικιλόδινον,
ὑμοί μαλ’ ἐν νεφεσσὶ ψέρων, ὄνχυσεις μεμαρτώσοι.
ἡ δ’ ἐλέου, γναμπτοὶς πεπαρμένῃ ὄμφ’ ὄνχυσιν,
μύρετο τὴν δ’ ὅ’ ἐπικρατέως πρὸς μῦθον ἔειπεν—
"δαιμόνι, τί λέληκας; ἔχει νῦ ἔσεῖ πολλὸν ἀρείων—
τῇ δ’ εἶς ὅ’ ἁν ἐγὼ περ ἄγω καὶ ἀοιδὸν ἐσύσαν—
δείπνον δ’ αἰ κ’ ἐθέλω ποιήσομαι ἢ μεθήσο.
ἀφρων δ’ ὃς κ’ ἐθέλη πρὸς κρέασιον ἀντιφερίσειν,
νίκης τε στέρεται πρὸς τ’ αἰσχρεὶν ἀλγεῖα πάσχειν."
```

Thus the hawk spoke to the nightingale with spotted neck, carrying it high in the clouds, after seizing it in its talons; and she, pierced by the curved talons, pitifully cried. And the hawk strongly advised her:

“Fool, why are you screaming; one much stronger has you now.
I shall take you wherever, even though you’re a singer:
and if I want I shall make you my dinner or let you go.
Senseless is he who chooses to vie against those who are stronger;
he is robbed of victory and besides shame suffers pains.”

61. Sellschopp (1934) 83-86.
62. One exception is Nagy (1990b) 65 n.71.
63. Nagy (1990b) 61-66 has an extended discussion of this process.
To clarify what this fable means, Hesiod will next instruct Perses to hearken to δίκη and to avoid ὑβρίς (213), the implication being that the hawk’s actions are hybristic. However, the usual pattern in early epic of bird omens that involve birds of prey, or οἰνοματή, is that their superior strength is regarded as a virtue, not a vice. We may compare Hesiod’s omen with what happens after Telemakhos and the seer Theoklymenos arrive in Ithaka, when a hawk (κῆρος), “the swift messenger of Apollo” (Odyssey 15.526), flies by on the right carrying a dove (πελειχα) and plucking out its feathers (15.525-27). This behavior is read by Theoklymenos to mean that Telemakhos’ γένος will remain superior in Ithaka, and that this state of affairs is backed by divine sanction (15.531-34). Similarly, earlier in the same book when Telemakhos is about to take leave of Menelaos in Sparta, an eagle flies by the right of his chariot with a goose (χηνίν) in its talons (15.160-64). Helen reads this action positively as an indication that Odysseus will return home and take revenge against the suitors (15.172-78). Penelope’s dream of an eagle that descends and kills her goose, in which the eagle subsequently speaks to her as Odysseus and interprets its own behavior to mean that Odysseus will kill the suitors (19.536-53), fits this same pattern. And finally, after Agamemnon urges the Achaeans not to lose heart even though Hektor has been pinned against their ships in Iliad 8, Zeus sends an eagle with a fawn in its talons, which the narrator interprets to mean that the Achaeans still have the support of Zeus in their efforts (8.247-52).

Thus Hesiod is actually urging his audience of Perses and the kings, as well as his external audience, to “misread” the hawk’s behavior, according to similar instances in early epic, in favor of his own idiosyncratic reading. For our purposes, what is interesting is that Hesiod assumes that his internal audiences (Perses and the kings) will interpret the hawk’s behavior—in short, might makes right—in the traditional way. It is the skewing of their interpretation relative to what he expects of his external audience that will allow for the “correct” reading. Sympathy with the victim, and not with the more powerful bird of prey, is what Hesiod is advocating, and this invites his external audience to rethink the traditional paradigm. It is not that this paradigm is “wrong” in any objective sense, only that context gives the ultimate meaning to an omen, not a rigid framework of comparison. Early epic has here self-consciously appropriated the inherent ambiguity in the discourse of bird omen reading as a metaphor for how it should be read itself. And yet like Wilde’s statement about art in the epigraph of this paper, this discursive ambiguity offers the ultimate hedge because there is nothing objective in it. If a bird omen or Hesiod’s narrative is read “correctly,” then one gains some insight into their behavior by means of it; but if it is not, then it is not the omen or Hesiod that was “wrong,” only one’s interpretation that failed.

Early epic can also appropriate the discourse of bird omen reading to reflect its own performative context. As an example of this, let us now turn to the contentious interpretations of the bird omen in Iliad 12 by Hektor and Poulydamas. There the Trojans have reached the trench before the Achaeans...
rampart and are about to cross it and break through. This break will be decisive for the action, yet it is at this moment that the narrator reports (*Iliad* 12.201-7):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>αἰετὸς ύπιπτῆς ἐπ’ ἀριστερὰ λαῶν ἕργων,</td>
<td>a high-flying eagle cutting to the left of the host,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>φοινίκες δράκοντα δέρων ὄνυχεσσι πέλαργον</td>
<td>in its talons carrying a monstrous, blood-red serpent,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ζωὸν ἐτ’ ἀσφαίρουτα καὶ οὐ ποὺ λήθετο χάρμης</td>
<td>still quivering with life; and it had not yet forgotten its lust for war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>κόκυς γὰρ αὐτὸν ἔχουσα κατὰ στῆθος παρὰ δείρην</td>
<td>For bending back it struck the eagle still holding it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἰδνωθεὶς ὀπίσω ὥς ὑ’ ἀπὸ ἔθεν ἤκε χαμαζέ</td>
<td>on the breast by the neck. And suffering from the pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἀλγήσας ὀδύνησι, μέσῳ δ’ ἐν κάμβαλ’ ὀμίλῳ,</td>
<td>the eagle threw it away from itself earthward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>αὐτὸς δὲ κλάγξας πέττετο πυνθή ἀνέμως.</td>
<td>and hurled it down in the middle of the throng,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interpretations of this omen that are advanced by Poulydamas and the subsequent rejection of all bird interpretation by Hektor provide a very different context from that of the Achaeans in *Iliad* 2. There, we recall, Odysseus successfully reperformed the oracular reading given nine years before by Kalkhas, which was in turn further endorsed by Nestor, to reenergize the Achaeans. Here, by contrast, we have no expert diviner—Poulydamas is a respected counselor but no more—and we have Hektor who, like the suitor Eurymakhos in *Odyssey* 2.181-82, will challenge the efficacy of the entire *oionomantic* system. But I am less concerned with what their respective readings have to say about the plot—of course Hektor will be wrong and Poulydamas right—than with how the *Iliad* uses this event to reenact its own performative mode. A successful performance of divination involves the ability to improvise a reading spontaneously, as did Hesiod, and apply it to the events at hand; its “truth,” as we have had occasion to state earlier, is authorized by the efficacy of the performance.

In this respect, Rebecca Bushnell has drawn attention to how Poulydamas’ interpretation both repeats the narrative description of the omen and then supplements it. When Poulydamas gives his interpretation, he begins with a redescription (12.219-21=201-03) of the eagle and serpent, but then adds his own ending to the “narrative” (12.221-22):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ἄφαρ δ’ ἀφάγχηκε πάρος φίλα οἰκί’ ἱκέθαι,</td>
<td>but [the eagle] let [the serpent] go before reaching its dear home,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>οὐ δὲ τέλεσε σφέρων δόμαιν τεκέσσαιν ἓσσιν.</td>
<td>and did not succeed in bringing it to give to his children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significantly, Poulydamas actually omits the details regarding the serpent striking the eagle, yet adds his own ending and rationale for why the eagle had got hold of the serpent in the first place. For Bushnell, Poulydamas is here taking on the role of the poet of the *Iliad* in his capacity to “rewrite the sign.”\(^{65}\) In my view, this analysis assumes (through the metaphor of writing) too limited a view of the composition and performance history of the *Iliad*. Instead, I prefer to see Poulydamas’ reinterpretation of the omen as an example of an improvised narrative, which is what a talented seer would do to fit the circumstances. Not only does Poulydamas want to caution against retribution by the Achaeans,\(^ {66}\) he also wants to humanize the Trojans in the process by identifying the eagle as a parent with children who fails to return home. In the anthropological terms set forth earlier, Poulydamas has switched back from the nonnormal to the normal mode. However, this kind of improvisation can in turn be related not to a writing poet, but rather either to an oral poet who composes while he performs,\(^ {67}\) or to a later performer such as a rhapsode who could also improvise Homeric verses in the midst of live performance.\(^ {68}\) In this sense, Bushnell is correct to see an analogy between Poulydamas and the performance context of Homeric poetry.

We may relate Poulydamas’ improvisation to Odysseus’ reperformance of Kalkhas’ prophecy in *Iliad* 2.311-20 (discussed earlier). There we were not privy to Kalkhas’ actual words given nine years previously, but nevertheless we observed how Odysseus took advantage of the depressed mood of the Achaeans to recall specifically that prophecy and no doubt to improvise, through his own words, the description for greater rhetorical impact. That performance succeeded in reviving Achaean morale, not because it was true, but because Odysseus’ accomplished skills as speaker were effective at that moment to inspire them to further action. Again the *Iliad* is drawing an analogy between the action internal to the narrative and its own external performative mode. But if Odysseus was able to win over his audience, by contrast and for reasons of plot, Poulydamas’ improvisation will not be successful. Instead, the Trojan warriors will be persuaded by Hektor’s famous attack against the entire *oïonomantic* system, which cleverly forecasts and ironically situates Hektor’s own dramatic death in Book 22, where he himself will be compared to a bird of omen (*Iliad* 22.308).

By converting Hektor into the very omen that he will misread, the *Iliad* further collapses the distinction between internal character and external audience. Although Poulydamas is not the equivalent of Hektor’s brother Helenos, who is a skilled augur (*Iliad* 6.76) and is described in the same terms as Kalkhas (*Iliad* 1.69), he is presented as a competent interpreter.

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66. We may note that the blood-red (δακτυλιώτις) serpent, identified with the Achaeans in *II*. 2.308, is here similarly described as blood-red (φοῖνικος), 12.202=220).
68. On improvisation by rhapsodes, see Collins (2001).
Nevertheless Hektor will have none of it and lambastes the entire *oιόνομαντικ* system (*Iliad* 12.237-43):

```
tυνη δ’ οιόνοιςια ταυτιτερύγεσσι κελεύεις
πείθεσθαι, τῶν οὗ τι μετετρέπομον’ ο.timedelta: άλεγίζω.
εἰτ’ ἐπὶ δεξί ίσωσι πρὸς τὸ τ’ ἥλιον τι,
εἰτ’ ἐπ’ ἀριστερὰ τοι γε ποτὶ ζόφον ἤφεοντα.
ἡμεῖς δὲ μεγάλοιο Δίος πεθώμεθα βουλητα,
ὅς πάσι βουλαί καὶ ἀβανάτοιον ἀνάσσει,
εῖς οἴωνος ἄριστος ἀμώνεσθαι περὶ πάτρης.
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You command me to believe wide-winged birds of omen—
these I neither consider nor am I concerned with them,
whether they travel on the right toward the dawn and sun,
or whether indeed on the left toward the cloudy darkness.
Let us be persuaded by the will of great Zeus
who rules all mortals and immortals.
One omen is best: to defend the fatherland.

Hektor’s radical denial of any validity to the *oιόνομαντικ* system, along with his famous martial quote, is not exactly comparable to Eurymakhos’ skepticism of birds in *Odyssey* 2.181-82 (discussed earlier). Just before these lines, Hektor alludes to the fact that Zeus had given his sanction for Hektor to reach the Achaean ships. In Book 11, Zeus sent Iris specifically to inform Hektor that once Agamemnon returned to his chariot he would have the upper hand in battle until he reached the Achaean ships and until sunset (186-94). Thus Hektor’s lack of use for Poulydamas’ bird divination at this moment is actually in accord with Zeus’ will. However, his unwillingness to acknowledge the efficacy of the system at all is an odd blindspot, and perhaps bespeaks his present narrowness of purpose, because elsewhere Hektor has complete confidence in Zeus’ ability to communicate his intentions to him through signs (cf. *Iliad* 8.169-71, thunder, and 175-76). As we have already seen, the aggressive behavior of eagles and other *oιώνοι* are typically interpreted in positive terms. But similar to Hesiod’s inversion of the traditional *oιώνος* paradigm, Poulydamas stresses the failure of the eagle to return home and feed its children, rather than its superior power to carry the serpent aloft. I suggest that this nontraditional reading may also factor into Hektor’s skepticism. Most striking, though, is how Hektor makes the whole concept of *oιώνος* and the system behind it a metaphor for warfare. From the point of view of the internal narrative, then, Hektor fails to understand the implications of the bird omen; but from the point of view of the external audience, Hektor fails to see that more than one sign system is at work and that they are interdependent. He upholds one sign (Iris’ message) at the expense of another (*oιώνοι*), which in slightly different terms was precisely the point of Apollo’s warning in the *Homerica Hymn to Hermes* (543-49, discussed

above). The *Iliad* caps this misreading of signs by comparing Hektor, moments before Achilles’ fatal speartooth, to a high-flying eagle swooping down after a lamb or hare (22.308-10). At this point Hektor has become “a bird sign, the omen of his own death.”70 The peril of misreading or not reading the birds, both for character and audience, could not be more vividly captured than it is here.

Hektor’s distrust of Poulydamas’ reading is only one instance of several in the *Iliad* in which bird divination and diviners more generally are challenged. At times the skills of professional diviners are even patently undercut. So for example, in the catalogue of ships we hear about what happened to the bird diviner Ennomos, leader of the Mysians (*Iliad* 2.858-61):

> Μυαλων δὲ Χρύσις ἢρχε καὶ Ἄννωμος οἰωνιστής
> ἀλλ’ οὐκ οἰωνοίσιν ἐρύσατο κῆρα μέλαιναν,
> ἀλλ’ ἐδάμη ὑπὸ χεροὶ ποδώκεας Αἰακίδαο
> ἐν ποταμῷ, ὅθι περ Ἄκης κεράζει καὶ ἄλλοις.

Khromis and the bird diviner Ennomos led the Mysians but he did not fend off black death through birds of omen, but was overcome at the hands of swift-footed Achilles in the river where he destroyed other Trojans as well.

To this we may compare Merops of Perkote, “who knew prophecy (μαντοσύνη) beyond all others,” and tried unsuccessfully to dissuade his sons from battle (*Iliad* 2.831-34). They will be killed by Diomedes (11.329-34). In a similar vein we may compare an offhand remark by Priam, made in objection to Hekabe’s unwillingness to let him approach Achilles for the return of Hektor’s body. Unbeknownst to Hekabe, Priam has already been informed by Iris that his journey has been ordained by Zeus (*Iliad* 24.171-87). After sarcastically telling Hekabe not to be a bad bird of omen (ἀρνις κακός, 24. 219) herself, Priam then adds (24.220-22):

> εἰ μὲν γάρ τις μ’ ἄλλοις ἐπιχθονίων ἐκέλευεν,
> ἂν οἱ μάντεις εἰσὶν θυσικοί ἢ ιερηθοί,
> ψευδός κεν φαίμεν καὶ νοσφιξοίμεθα μᾶλλον.

For if some other mortal commanded me, either the seers or incense readers or priests, we could rather call it a lie and disregard it.

These passages suggest that as far as the *Iliad* is concerned, it is simply not true that seers (apart from Kalkhas in Book 1) have “unconditional authority.”71 Even Kalkhas’ prophetic skill is berated by Agamemnon (*Iliad* 1.106-08), in terms that parallel Hektor’s distaste for the readings and advice of Poulydamas (*Iliad* 12.231-36). Of course both Agamemnon and Hektor, for reasons of character and plot, are presented as blind to their own shortsight-

71. Pace Stockinger (1959) 15-16 and 51.
edness. But we may still ask why the *Iliad* presents mantic authority as suspect by both Achaeans and Trojans, and often subjects it to the greater authority of politically more powerful figures.

The *Odyssey* presents a similar picture. Apart from Teiresias in Book 11, mantic authority is consistently denigrated. We have already seen how the seer Halitherses, who "alone surpassed his agemates in knowing the birds and pronouncing portents" (ὁ γὰρ ὁιός ὁμηλικὴν ἐκέκαστο | ὑμνίθας γνώναι καὶ ἐννοίμα μυθήσασθαι, *Odyssey* 2.158-59) was overruled in his reading by Eurymakhos (*Odyssey* 2.178-82). A nonspecialist like Telemakhos, who is usually a firm believer in portents, can occasionally give expression to skeptical attitudes. After Athena disguised as Mentes leaves the palace in Book 1, he deceptively tells Eurymakhos that he no longer believes in prophecies (θεοπροτία) about his father's return delivered by seers (θεσπρότος) brought in by his mother (*Odyssey* 1.414-16). We know Telemakhos is lying here, but it is the underlying sentiment that prophets can be routinely disbelieved that draws our attention.\(^{72}\) Completely unnatural portents themselves can go unheeded. The portents (τέρας) shown forth by the gods to Odysseus' men on Thrinakia—crawling ox hides and bellowing hunks of flesh—fail to move them, as they continue to eat the cattle of Helios for another six days (*Odyssey* 12.394-98). These events had been preceded by a striking inversion, whereby the starving companions of Odysseus were forced through hunger to eat birds (δρυνίθας, 12.331). We may recall that birds of prey, the meat-eaters, are the most important birds of omen. Even the gods can appear as carrion-eating birds (*Iliad* 7.59, Athena and Apollo as vultures), which otherwise eat men (*Iliad* 1.5). Like Hektor, by eating birds the companions of Odysseus in a sense become omens of their own demise. Finally, the vision of Theoklymenos, reported to the suitors whose minds have been addled by Athena, is of course laughed at (*Odyssey* 20.345-58). Again, we may conclude prima facie that it is primarily for reasons of plot that portents and seers are disbelieved, but this can only be part of the answer.

The presentation of mantic authority in early epic is all the more remarkable in the light of several brief historical examples from the Classical period. By the fifth century the mantic authority of diviners and of omens themselves, especially during wartime, is more established and considerably less subject to challenge. Aristophanes alludes for example to the owl that flew over the Athenians at Salamis, which signaled the presence of Athena and heralded their victory (*Wasps* 1086 with scholia ad loc.). Similarly according to Plutarch, an owl appeared from the right and settled on Themistocles' ship-rigging as the Greeks were debating strategy; this temporarily inspired them to fight (*Themistocles* 12.1). As Xenophon began his journey to Ephesus to meet Cyrus, a sitting eagle shrieked to his right.\(^{73}\)

72. Stockinger (1959) 51.
73. Cf. the auspicious eagle at Xenophon, *Cyropaideia* 2.4.19.

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When this was interpreted by his μάντις to be unfavorable toward the acquisition of wealth because eagles obtain their food by flying, the omen caused Xenophon to decline mercenary leadership (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 6.1.23).74 The Spartan struggle to obtain the Elean seer Tisamenos (Herodotus 9.33-36), and their ultimately successful effort to kill Mardonius’ Elean seer Hegesistratos (9.37), because of all the harm he had wrought for them, testify in their respective ways to their high regard for divination. These examples are not meant to be exhaustive, but they are adequate to show that at least during wartime, mantic authority and direction was an indispensable component of military leadership. And even during a period when extispicy, and not augury, was the more important divination system, augury nevertheless retained an important supplemental significance.75

What remains to be explained in conclusion, then, is why early epic presents mantic authority in general, and bird divination in particular, as so malleable and subject to criticism. I have already suggested that part of the answer must obviously be for reasons of plot and character. As characters who are often “adversaries” like the Trojans or the suitors misread bird oracles, the tension is heightened for the external audience as they progressively witness their inevitable decline, which has been structured by the plot. However, I do not believe the answer should be limited to an interruption of audience expectation,76 because every Greek would have been familiar with the inherent narrative ambiguities of oracular discourse in the “real” world. Moreover, we have seen how much in common the early epic performance of bird divination and oracles more generally have with some contemporary non-Greek divination systems. For both of these, the “truth” of any oracular performance is referenced by collective agency, not any objective relationship between the nonnormal grid and social reality. Hence even a “traditional” understanding, as in Hesiod’s fable *cum* omen of the hawk and nightingale, may be modified to fit present needs. Yet we have also seen several instances of how early epic, itself a performed narrative medium, can in the context of bird divination appropriate both aetistic discourse as well as improvisational features similar to its own performance background. These moves allow epic narrative to reenact its own performance and thereby to structure the external audience’s response to it by demonstrating the risks of overly rigid interpretive frameworks. One must interpret a bird omen as carefully as one interprets Hesiod or Homer. One must also remember, however, that the “truth” of a bird omen is always a performed truth—its efficacy lies ultimately not in a rule-bound system, but in the moment and actuality of performance when the signs of the gods are brought decisively to bear on a situation at hand.*

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74. Xenophon himself thought that a μάντις was a basic requirement for any army (*Anabasis* 7.1.35). For these and further examples, see Dillon (1996) 110, 112, and passim.


76. As Morrison (1992b) 104 argues.

* All translations are by the author.