

NICOLA ZITO

Etymologies and Puns in Maximus' Περὶ Καταρχῶν

The aim of this contribution is to offer an essay that investigates the different ways in which Maximus plays in his astrological poem with the (presumed) origin of the words used by him or with their meaning. We will first see how our astrologer is able to put etymology at the service of the composition of his predictions; then how he exploits the semantic ambiguity of certain terms, not only to show off his erudition, but also to make his poem more in keeping with the dictates of astrological literature; finally, how he implicitly succeeds in establishing what is for him the correct interpretation of a word susceptible to different and conflicting readings.

Lo scopo del presente contributo è quello di offrire un saggio che indagherà i diversi modi in cui Massimo gioca nel suo poema astrologico con la (presunta) origine delle parole da lui usate o con il loro significato. Vedremo dapprima come il nostro astrologo riesca a mettere l'etimologia al servizio della composizione delle sue predizioni; poi come egli sfrutti l'ambiguità semantica di certi termini, non solo per fare sfoggio della propria erudizione, ma anche in ossequio ai dettami della letteratura astrologica; infine, come egli riesca implicitamente a stabilire quale sia per lui la corretta interpretazione di una parola suscettibile di diverse e contrastanti letture.

The Περὶ Καταρχῶν is a short epic-didactic poem that treats an astrological subject¹. Probably composed towards the middle of the 4th century AD by the Neoplatonic philosopher Maximus of Ephesus, who was a teacher and friend of the emperor Julian², the poem develops a particular branch of ancient astrology, that of the καταρχαί, or initiatives, in which the observation of the different astral configurations allows to establish the most appropriate moment to take a certain action: when to travel? when to get married? when to operate on a sick person? when to engage in agricultural activities? and so on³. The various sections into which Maximus' poem is divided are dedicated to questions of this kind: the astrologer analyzes the position of the Moon with respect to the zodiac signs and planets, each time dedicating a brief prediction to each of these configurations. In the prediction, he briefly evokes the result, satisfactory or unsuccessful, of the activity which one wants to start⁴.

It is a refined text, with an exquisitely Alexandrine taste: in a poem that is already short in itself⁵, the author proceeds by rapid sketches, in which he deeply and pro-

¹ Zito 2016, whose introduction and commentary should be referred to for a more complete and detailed bibliographic documentation.

² Zito 2016, VII-XXIII.

³ Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 458-486; Zito 2016, XXIIIff.

⁴ Zito 2016, XXV-XXIX.

⁵ Due to a breakdown of the manuscript tradition, we now read only 610 hexameters of the approximately one thousand of which the poem was originally supposed to consist. See Zito 2016, XXIVff. and XXXIVff.

fusely communicates his literary erudition. There is practically no verse in the *Περὶ Καταρχῶν* that does not echo an author of the past, from the Homeric poems to Quintus of Smyrna: Maximus quotes, imitates, and, through his lexical choices, takes a position on *vexatae quaestiones* of philological, astrological or mythological argument⁶.

It is therefore not surprising that a *poeta doctus* like Maximus is in possession of a solid wealth of knowledge in the etymological field as well, and I propose, with this brief contribution, to offer an essay that investigates the different ways in which Maximus plays from time to time with the (presumed) origin of the words used by him or with their meaning. We will first see how our astrologer is able to put etymology at the service of the composition of his predictions; then how he exploits the semantic ambiguity of certain terms, not only to show off his erudition, but also to make his poem more in keeping with the dictates of astrological literature; finally, how he implicitly succeeds in establishing what is for him the correct interpretation of a word susceptible to different and conflicting readings.

1. *Etymology and astrology*

The first example that I want to propose to the reader's attention is taken from the section *περὶ γάμου*. It is more specifically the prediction relating to the passage of the Moon in the sign of Gemini (lines 96-98):

Εἰ δὲ Θεραπναίοισιν ἐπορνυμένη Διδύμοισιν
 δεύτερον ἡμᾶρ ἄγησι, γάμου μεμνημένος εἶναι
 οἰκοσόον γὰρ ἄκοιτιν ἐνὶ μεγάροισι κομίζοις.

If it is towards the Therapnean Twins that (Selene) rushes on the second day, do consider marriage: in fact, you will welcome a bride into your home who will take care of it.

Gemini are here identified, in a traditional way, with Castor and Pollux⁷: Therapne, a town located a few kilometers from Sparta, was the main place of worship of the Dioscuri⁸. The link between the sons of Zeus and the name of their place of worship clearly emerges from the explanation of the toponym *Θεράπναι* that we can find in Stephanus of Byzantium (Θ 26)⁹:

⁶ Zito 2016, XL-LVI.

⁷ Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 135f.

⁸ Zito 2016, 90.

⁹ Billerbeck - Zubler 2011, 232f.

Θεράπναι· πόλις Λακωνική, ἣν τινες Σπάρτην φασίν. Ἔστι καὶ τόπος ἔχων ναὸν τῶν Διοσκούρων, διὰ τὸ ἐκεῖσε τούτους τιμᾶσθαι. Θεραπεύειν γὰρ τιμᾶν σημαίνει καὶ <ναός> τὴν οἰκίαν. Τὸ ἔθνικὸν Θεραπναῖος καὶ Θεραπναία καὶ Θεραπναῖον.

Therapne: city of Laconia, which some call Sparta. It is also a place that has a temple of the Dioscuri, due to the honor in which they are held there. Θεραπεύειν means in fact 'to honor' and <ναός> 'home'. The adjective indicating nationality is Θεραπναῖος, Θεραπναία, Θεραπναῖον.

In composing his short marriage prediction, Maximus seems to have had in mind an 'etymological' interpretation not unlike that provided by Stephanus. The bride whose character is quickly outlined in line 98 is in fact doubly linked to the domestic sphere (prefix οἰκο-, syntagma ἐνὶ μεγάροισι ~ ναός), on which she will certainly have a positive influence, by taking care of it (element -σός ~ θεραπεύειν). This obviously makes it desirable to contract marriage (line 97 γάμου μνημένοσ εἶναι). Moreover, it is not improbable that this explanation of the toponym Θεράπναι overlaps here with another one, i.e. the one that related it to the noun θεράπνη, 'handmaid' but also 'dwelling'¹⁰.

While this overlap may remain only a hypothesis, what is certain is that a link between what was believed to be the explanation of the adjective Θεραπναῖος and the auspicious prediction formulated by Maximus seems absolutely plausible. And it is interesting to see how the poet used his etymological skills to create one of those associations of ideas, usually very banal, which we often find at the basis of astrological predictions, for example the prohibition of marrying a virgin when Selene is in the sign of Virgo, the invitation to take care of the goats when the goddess occupies Capricorn, or the profit that she provides fishermen during her stay in the sign of Pisces¹¹. In the example that I have just analyzed, which remains, to my knowledge, the only one of its kind within the *Περὶ Καταρχῶν*, the favorable outcome of the prediction is determined not by the name of the constellation (Δίδυμοι) as it usually happens, but, in a much more subtle and original way, by the very meaning of the epithet that the poet decided to attribute to it.

2. Word games of Alexandrian taste

But our passage allows us to highlight two other aspects of the way in which Maximus exploits the potential of the language.

¹⁰ Chantraine, *DELG*, 430f.

¹¹ Zito 2016, XXVIII f.

The first is lexical inventiveness: the adjective οἰκοσόος is probably Maximus' creation (of which Nonnus of Panopolis will be reminded a century later, as shown in his *Dionysiaca*, XXI 272 λάτριον ἔργον... οἰκοσσόον) and there are numerous *hapax legomena* and neologisms, including morphological and semantic ones, which we encounter in Περὶ Καταρχῶν¹².

The second aspect, more relevant for our perspective, is the predilection of our poet for words that often have very different meanings, which Maximus is pleased to bring together in the same context. Let's take οἰκοσόος: the ancient grammatical tradition was uncertain whether the element -σόος should be traced back to σώζω 'to preserve' or to σεύω 'to shake'¹³. Not without a certain irony, therefore, Maximus introduces us to a wife who is perhaps not as recommendable as it seemed at first sight.

Formulations of this kind are relatively numerous in the poem, and they are not always original ideas of our astrologer, who sometimes draws them heavily from his predecessors.

The confusion between σώζω and σεύω reappears for example in line 569 (section περὶ κλοπῆς), where Maximus predicts, about a stolen object, that σώεται ἄψ ἔς δῶμα καὶ ἔς χέρας εἶσιν ἄνακτος. Maximus is visibly inspired here by Apollonius of Rhodes, II 295-296 ὑπέστρεφον ἄψ ἐπὶ νῆα / σώεσθαι. And like Apollonius, Maximus lets the two interpretations of the verb σώω ('to save oneself' and 'leap forward'), both pertinent, conflate and merge in this context¹⁴.

Not unlike this, in line 74 μὴ σύγε μοι μνώοιο πολυκτεάνων ὑμεναίων, the two values of the verb μνάομαι overlap: the verb is in fact constructed with the genitive as in the *Iliad*, II 686 πολέμοιο δυσηχέος ἐμνώοντο 'to think', 'to turn your mind'. However, the context – we are in the section περὶ γάμου – and the proximity of the *iunctura* πολυκτεάνων ὑμεναίων, cannot help but suggest the meaning of 'court' that the same verb can also assume, for example in the *Odyssey*, I 39 μνάσθαι ἄκοιτιν. This pun probably depends on a passage from Callimachus, *Hymns*, II 95 μνώομενος προτέρης ἀρπακτύος, where the participle μνώομενος appears at a short distance from the mention of the νύμφη of Apollo, the eponymous heroine Cyrene, and it is referred to the god in the act of remembering the courtship of his bride¹⁵. Once again, Nonnus of Panopolis will remember the passage of Maximus in the *Dionysiaca*, XXIX 337 (Athena) μνησαμένη νόθα λέκτρα πεδοτρεφῶν ὑμεναίων¹⁶.

More original is the case of lines 349-350 of Περὶ Καταρχῶν where, with regard

¹² Zito 2016, LIX.

¹³ Livrea 2000, 198f.; Agosti 2003, 467.

¹⁴ Zito 2016, 172.

¹⁵ Williams 1978, 81.

¹⁶ Agosti 2013, 327.

to a fugitive slave, Maximus takes into consideration the possibility that he leaves his master's house during the second day of the stay of the Moon in the sign of Leo: εἰ δέ γ' ἐν ἡοῖ / δευτατὴ αἴροιο φυγὴν... The form δευτάτιος used by Maximus is naturally equivalent to δεύτατος, the Homeric superlative of δεύτερος, whose meaning is always that of 'last'¹⁷. However, since Selene takes about two and a half days to cross a sign of the Zodiac¹⁸, it is probable that Maximus, aware of this semantic 'incongruity', deliberately made the sense of the positive degree ('second') and that of the superlative of the adjective in question ('last') converge in the same expression.

A similar case seems to me to be represented by line 443 (section περὶ παίδων διδασκαλίας) in which the poet designates the constellation of Virgo through the periphrasis Κούρης... φιαρὸν δέμας Ἰκαριώνης. Before Maximus, the rare adjective φιαρός has only a handful of occurrences among the Alexandrine poets who, however, attribute a double meaning to it¹⁹. Callimachus, for example, uses it in the sense of λαμπρός 'luminous' or 'shining', said of the dawn in fr. 539 Pfeiffer φιαρὴ ... ἔως, while Nicander uses it in the sense of λιπαρός 'oily' or 'fatty', for example in the *Alexipharmaca*, 91 φιαρὴν δὲ ποτοῦ ... γρηῖν, in reference to the coat that forms on freshly milked milk.

As for line 443 of the *Περὶ Καταρχῶν*, it is clear that Maximus, always careful to emphasize the luminosity of the celestial bodies he mentions in his astrological poem²⁰, takes φιαρός in the sense of λαμπρός. However, he knows that φιαρός can also be λιπαρός, and we understand this thanks to the presence of the noun δέμας, referring to the body of Erigone, daughter of Icarus, the heroine identified here with the sign of Virgo²¹: since Homer λιπαρός appears in fact in relation to parts of the body, if not the body itself, of gods and heroes, for example in the *Iliad*, II 44 ποσσὶ δ' ὑπὸ λιπαροῖσιν, which is said about Agamemnon, or in a passage from Hesiod, *Theogony*, 901 λιπαρὴν Θέμιν.

Maximus thus shows us not only that he knows a rare Alexandrine gloss like φιαρός, but also that he masters both its meanings. However, his display of erudition takes place via a great economy of means: it was enough for the poet to insert in his hexameter an apparently banal word such as δέμας to give the periphrasis in question all its semantic complexity²².

¹⁷ Zito 2016, 136.

¹⁸ Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 474.

¹⁹ Zito 2016, 153.

²⁰ Zito 2016, XLIII f.

²¹ Bouché-Leclercq 1899, 139 f.; Zito 2016, 125 and 160 f.

²² There could be in Maximus' passage a latent play on Ἡριγόνη and Ἡώς, that is said to be ἠριγένεια in early hexameter, for example in the *Iliad*, I 477. If this is the case, it may then be a further pointer to Callimachus, fr. 539 Pfeiffer.

However, this exploitation of the potential of the vocabulary is not dictated solely by the poet's desire to exhibit his erudition, but it also responds to very specific formal requirements. We must not forget, in fact, that the *Περὶ Καταρχῶν* is a work dedicated to astrological topics, and that this kind of poetry is conventionally characterized by a certain obscurity of language, an aspect to which not only the abundance of *hapax legomena* and neologisms, but also the continuous use of deliberately ambiguous expressions, substantially contribute. By doing so, the poet-astrologer forges for himself a more hieratic allure and gives an undoubted solemnity to his text; his predictions will be at the same time more enigmatic and difficult to interpret correctly, thus protecting him from any criticism from readers in the case of erroneous predictions. This also happens in the oracular poetry, with which Maximus' *Περὶ Καταρχῶν* shares various formal aspects, such as the formulaic character or the repetitiveness of expressions in use²³.

3. *Etymology and philology*

Maximus also offers us several examples of the opposite phenomenon compared to the one we have just analyzed. If so far we have seen how he seems to ingeniously exploit the polysemy of certain words, it is just as ingeniously that our astrologer shows to be capable of taking sides in favor of only one of the various possible meanings assumed by a single word.

The most eloquent example of this semantic attitude is represented by a passage from the *περὶ γάμου* section, which opens with the prediction relating to Selene's permanence in the signs of Sagittarius, Pisces and Aquarius. After having outlined the portrait of the ideal bride, the poet invites the reader to lead her without hesitation into his own home, provided of course that he *μονίην στυγέοι καὶ ἐλεύθερον ἤμαρ* (line 71).

Before Maximus, the noun *μονίη* is only attested in Empedocles, fr. 21,3 Wright, *σφαῖρος κυκλοτερῆς μονίη περιηγεί γαίων*, a passage in which the pre-Socratic mentions the One or Sphere, that is the condition of compact unity that distinguishes the elements, when Love prevails in the cosmos²⁴. Our astrologer seems to refer to this line explicitly: he takes up the rare gloss in question, inserted not coincidentally in an 'erotic' context, and opposes the optative *στυγέοι* to the participle *γαίων* that we find in Empedocles.

In Empedocles' verse, the noun *μονίη* could allude both to the immobility of the

²³ Zito 2016, LVI-LVIII and LXI-LXIV.

²⁴ Reale 1992, I 156.

Sphere, and therefore depend on μένω, and to its solitude or uniqueness, and thus be traced back to μόνος. The correct interpretation of this word probably already divided the Ancients – Eudemus, for example, explained it as ἀκινήσια – and the question remains open to this day, even if Empedocles has perhaps deliberately chosen to use an ambiguous word, susceptible to several interpretative levels²⁵.

However it may be, Maximus seems aware of the double problem – etymological and therefore philosophical – that is hidden in Empedocles' line, and he decides to take sides in favour of one of the two possible interpretations. We must not forget that Maximus of Ephesus is not only a *poeta doctus*, but also, and I would say primarily, a Neoplatonic philosopher, author of Aristotelian commentaries²⁶, and therefore he is probably used to this type of complex exegesis of the text of his predecessors. For him μονή comes from μόνος, and he lets us grasp this, implicitly just as much as incontrovertibly, by inserting, next to the 'incriminated' word, the Homeric *iunctura* ἐλεύθερον ἡμαρ to designate the celibacy, in other words the solitude, of the groom. In doing so, he suggests at the same time to the reader who is competent in the matter, and able to read between the lines, what the exact implications of Empedocles' passage describing the Sphere are for him.

In any case, despite the seriousness of the problem, even this time Maximus' line does not seem to be immune from a certain dose of irony: in Homer, in fact, the expression ἐλεύθερον ἡμαρ always appears in relation to prisoners of war (*Iliad*, VI 455; XVI 831; XX 193). Is the wedding day rather a δούλιον ἡμαρ?²⁷

Here we are at the end of this short contribution. Through the examples proposed, I hope I have managed to give a fairly exact impression of the erudition of Maximus, a refined poet who proves to have a broad, thorough, and philologically active knowledge of the production of his predecessors, not only poets but also philosophers. He masters the etymological and semantic peculiarities and does not hesitate to skillfully and diversely put them at the service of his literary activity, without ever taking himself too seriously²⁸.

Membre associé – Médecine grecque et littérature technique
(UMR8167 Orient et Méditerranée)
nicola.zito@icloud.com

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²⁵ Wright 1981, 188.

²⁶ Zito 2016, LXXXIII f.

²⁷ Homer, *Iliad*, VI 463; *Odyssey*, XIV 340; XVII 323.

²⁸ Agosti 2019, 124.

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