Minutes for Jenny Strauss Clay's presentation,  “The Name of Moly and the Nomos/Physis Opposition,” 17 December 2018

PLEASE WRITE WITH CORRECTIONS AND ADDITIONS TO lwash@uchicago.edu

“Beginning from the beginning”

an herb from Hermes the mediator

in contrast with the φύσις in Heraclitus B132, which “is accustomed to hide,” “here it seems to be something *visible.*”

Benveniste’s analysis of nouns in -σις suggests that the meaning must have foreshadowed Aristotle’s teleological φύσις (e.g. in the *Poetics* the genre“stopped when it achieved its φύσις”)

Moly has two components: root and flower; the black root is hidden, difficult to dig up.

a non-sequitur: “Gods can name it — but humans have a hard time digging it up”

αὐδή human language. Names known to gods are φύσει. For the moly, human beings might say “snowdrop” or “daisy.” There exist names given by humans that are not φύσει. “The distinction is clearly latent in Homer; my critics say that I take everything to be latent in Homer—but I hope to convince you.”

Od. 8 (handout 2): names imposed at birth, when child’s character not yet known

Od. 19: Autolycus ignores Eurycleia’s suggestion for the name of the child Odysseus

ὀδύσσεσθαι, which is usually used in connection with those who are objects of divine

wrath: “Why do you odysseus him so much, Zeus?” “Zeus and Helios odysseused him.”

additional wrinkle: Alcinous’ assertion of the universality of naming (of human beings) in contrast with Odysseus’ having also been called οὔτις.

Hesiod: two ἔριδες (*Op*.) - riddling words

Heraclitus’ ἀξύνετοι (Β1, Β34): human language incapable of expressing the one

Must use a multiplicity of human names

Parmenides: Being only expressed in negation, similes, metaphors; human names inaccurate, ambiguous; contrast his usage of κατατίθημι (“set down, as a law”) with the more usual verb in such contexts, ἐπιτίθημι (“set upon”); Parmenides’ puns, ambiguities, esp. ἀλλότριον φῶς

Empedocles B8: most say «birth» (which is anomalous). Empedocles does two things here: at first one reads φύσις as “stable nature,” but then at the next verse, through the apparent contrast with death, we might switch gears and reread the first line, taking φύσις as opposite of death, namely birth. But a tension: θνητῶν designates inherent mortality, and then line 4 only mentions birth; the difficulty lies in taking any mortal thing to have a stable essence, a φύσις.

Empedocles B9: whatever one makes of the text, Empedocles is— (my notes cut off here! but I recall the point being to the effect that he ambivalently accepts human names. —LW)

reiteration of initial claim: the complex is already found *in nuce* in Homer

DISCUSSION: J.S.C., A. Buccheri, G. Heinemann, A. Macé, K. Mackowiak, L. Wash, C. Zatta

A.M.: For Parmenides, are the mortals then imitating the gods in their naming practices?

J.S.C.: Goddess speaking uses contradictory language in reaching the mortals.

G.H.: a little note on Parmenides. φύσις language is fully in the realm of the δόξα, so the Homeric scenario does not to apply to Parmenides, although it may apply to Heraclitus. Also, Parmenides never uses φύεσθαι as a copula. So Parmenides is another story.

J.S.C.: Maybe. (I didn’t catch fuller response. —LW)

L.W.: (I said something about φύσις in Empedocles...)

J.S.C.: How does Empedocles know? νοῦς as balanced mixture would resemble sphairos

G.H.: only two more occurences of φύσις in Empedocles

A.M.: Does the φύσις of moly encompass the form, as well as the difficulty of extracting it? S. Amigues argues that it also encompasses the powers, both active and passive, and that the name may additionally refer to the particular ἔργον of the plant. Would you go as far as Amigues?

J.S.C.: As a mortal, I would call it a snowdrop, say it’s pretty, put it in a bouquet. But I’d

have to know its φύσις ... (again incomplete notes. —LW)

A.B.: Perhaps it is relevant that some pharmaka (in other texts) are named just by the color, for instance pharmaka leuka. Maybe showing color, appearance, is enough to reveal the “power”?

J.S.C.: That may be important - but it is also important in this case that the colors are

opposites, which reminds one of the opposites in Heraclitus in particular.

A.B.: Homer doesn’t often use color terms like this, so maybe that’s right.

J.S.C.: Greek color terms are of course much different from ours, so this demands more

attention.

G.H.: Returning to the context of the moly passage, at 286ff. the pharmakon is mentioned and its ergon. There is no need for Hermes at 303ff. to show the ergon, because it was already discussed.

J.S.C.: (response not recorded —LW)

A.M.: Looking forward to the dark and light in Parmenides - How does the opposition in Od. 10 play out in Parmenides?

J.S.C.: Huge problem. Night and fire not opposites. paths of night *and day.*

L.W.: How do you account for the single occurrence of φύσις in Homer? How does φύσις discourse fit into the Odyssey as a whole?

J.S.C.: cf. also νηπενθής in Od. 4.221. There are many layers, but the incident with Hermes is not so strange as to be discarded. (Everything is already there in Homer!)