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Palamedes' "Writing Lesson": On Writing, Narrative, and Erasure

Thomas E. Jenkins

Summary

In this essay, I shall consider some striking parallels between legends of writing as manipulated by both Jacques Derrida and Euripides; more specifically, I shall investigate how each author dissects a narrative—or narratives—of writing's invention in order later to construct writing as an inherently unstable semiotic system. In each instance, a seemingly straightforward "myth" of writing is re-narrated in a dark and sardonic vein, one that downplays the technical aspects of writing and highlights instead the hermeneutical ambiguities encoded within this new technology. The Greek myth of Palamedes (as re-narrated by Euripides) hinges on the invention and eventual misapprehension of the written sign; the story of Lévi-Strauss among the Nambikwara (as re-narrated by Derrida) performs exactly the same function, though the tale features an intrepid anthropologist in place of an intrepid Greek warrior. In their separate investigations of writing, both re-tellers focus on the term *pharmakon* as the embodiment of the paradox that lies at the heart of the narrative: that the discovery of writing is at the same time the discovery of erasure, including the possible erasure of its own discoverer.

Writing Lessons

I turn first to Derrida's re-telling of a tale—even "myth"—of an invention of writing. In his influential meditation on indeterminacy in language, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida cannily manipulates a narrative relayed by Claude Lévi-Strauss as a tool for his own inquiry on the complex correspondence between sound, sign, and violence. In the 1930s, Lévi-Strauss journeyed throughout Brazil as part of his ongoing investigations into tribal structure and kinship relations, two fundamental concerns of structural anthropology. The anthropologist later wrote up his observations in his famous *Tristes Tropiques*, itself a curious hybrid of treatise and travelogue. A great deal of this book concerns Lévi-Strauss' encounters with

native Brazilian rituals and daily life; in this regard, no tribe fascinated Lévi-Strauss more than the prickly Nambikwara, who had, apparently, never developed a writing system. In a particularly famous chapter, "A Writing Lesson," Lévi-Strauss describes how, in effect, he invented writing for the Nambikwara; he then goes on to illustrate, almost blithely, the invention's violent and unsavory aftermath. It is this episode that Derrida wickedly introduces as a perfect little *drama* in its own right: "[The Nambikwara's] incapacity [for writing] will be presently thought, within the ethico-political order, as an innocence and a non-violence interrupted by the forced entry of the West and the 'Writing Lesson.' We shall be present at that scene (*à cette scène*) in a little while."¹ Strikingly, Derrida envisions this episode of "writing's invention" as a dramatic scene from a play or script; moreover, he invites the reader to participate as audience—perhaps even as jury—as Lévi-Strauss foists his "invention" upon the illiterate and unwitting Nambikwara. (I shall return to the importance of a dramatic setting later in this essay.)

Lévi-Strauss' adventures begin happily enough. He relates in a simple, unaffected manner how he noticed the Nambikwara's initial, halting progress towards the implementation of written signs, and how he conducted an intriguing social experiment by handing them a superior technology:

It is unnecessary to point out that the Nambikwara have no written language, but they do not know how to draw either, apart from making a few dotted lines or zigzags on their gourds. Nevertheless, as I had done among the Caduveo, I handed out sheets of paper and pencils. At first they did nothing with them, then one day I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy, horizontal lines. I wondered what they were trying to do, then it was suddenly borne upon me that they were writing, or, to be more accurate, were trying to use their pencils in the same way as I did mine, which was the only way they could conceive of, because I had not yet tried to amuse them with my drawings. The majority did this and no more, *but the chief had further ambitions*. No doubt *he was the only one who had grasped the purpose of writing*² [emphasis mine].

This *scène*—as Derrida names it—neatly sets up the *dramatis personae*: the brilliant if naive "inventor" Lévi-Strauss; the cunning arch-nemesis The Chief; and a chorus of illiterate tribesmen who will play such an important role in the plot's tragicomic *dénouement*. This beginning to the tale neatly balances the clever chief and the headstrong interloper, counterweights

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1974), 110.

² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Dorren Weightman (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 296.

(and soon rivals) on either side of the invention of writing. Lévi-Strauss notes that *only* the chief had grasped the purpose of writing, and thereby singles out the chief as a man of especial cleverness. Envy and ambition, however, will twist the new and promising medium of writing to decidedly sinister ends.

Lévi-Strauss continues his tale by relating how he taught the chief to "write"; or at least how the two men entertained a fiction in which the chief's written symbols in fact possessed a meaning: ". . . there was a tacit understanding between us that his unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher."³ In effect, the two men *had* invented writing, by agreeing in an unspoken covenant that the written signs on a page, presented in a particular order, represented a stream of speech. What happens next could well be the subject of its own drama, Greek or otherwise. The chief unexpectedly calls an assembly of the people (Lévi-Strauss and entourage included) and pretends that he holds a missive penned by the anthropologist. As related by Lévi-Strauss, the Nambikwara chief brilliantly turns the invention of writing back on its inventor:

As soon as [the chief] had got the company together, he took from a basket a piece of paper covered with wavy lines and made a show of reading it, pretending to hesitate as he checked on it the list of objects I was to give in exchange for the presents offered me: so-and-so was to have a chopper in exchange for a bow and arrows, someone else beads in exchange for his necklaces This farce went on for two hours. Was he perhaps hoping to delude himself? More probably he wanted to astonish his companions We were eager to be off, since *the most dangerous point* would obviously be reached when all the marvels I had brought had been transferred to native hands. (*Tristes Tropiques* 296-297, [emphasis mine])

On this sorry episode, Derrida comments laconically: "The story is very beautiful (*très belle*). . . . All the organic complexity of writing is here collected within the simple focus of a parable (*d'une parabole*)."⁴

Derrida here displays a mordant wit; the story is *très belle* not because of its *content* (indeed, there is nothing particularly attractive about the folly on display), but because of its apparent lesson: as a parable about writing, the episode comments on the very real dangers inherent in the (mis)interpretation and misappropriation of written signs. Only days after Lévi-Strauss invents writing, the Chief in turn invents writing's darker, devious complement: forgery. By brandishing a forged contract in front of his people, the Chief simultaneously affirms the importance of writing as a measure of *truth* while duping his tribesmen at the same time and with the same document. The Chief's actions are, as Derrida notes, beautiful in a

³ Lévi-Strauss (above, note 2), 296.

⁴ Derrida (above, note 1), 126.

formal sense, since the entire nexus of meaning, interpretation, and written sign are knotted into a brief compass. Moreover, the story features a father of structuralism—Lévi-Strauss—pitted as an “other” who crosses the boundary from “culture” to “nature” (and from “writing” to “non-writing”) and who emerges scathed and bloodied from the experience.

Lévi-Strauss *does* learn his “writing lesson,” and in a roundabout way, the Chief does too: “The villagers who withdrew their allegiance to the chief after he had tried to exploit a feature of civilization (after my visiting he was abandoned by most of his people) felt in some obscure way *that writing and deceit had penetrated simultaneously into their midst*” (emphasis mine).⁵ We see here the integral connection of writing with deceit; the invention of the former necessitates the invention of the latter, at least as filtered through Lévi-Strauss’ own historical narrative. By the time the story is retold by Derrida, the tale is manipulated for the philosopher’s own literary ends. Derrida introduces his inquiry on Lévi-Strauss by noting one of his two main points: “. . . [violence] *does not supervene* from without upon an innocent language in order to surprise it, a language that suffers the aggression of writing as the accident of its disease, its defeat and its fall; but is the originary violence of a language which is always already a writing.”⁶ In other words, writing and violence are ontologically entwined because language itself (in any guise) is a type of violence, the deferment engendered by the riff between signifier and signified, Derrida’s famous *différance*. In support, Derrida notes that (as Lévi-Strauss relates) the Nambikwara do not employ proper names except as a malicious gesture: there is power in names, and one’s proper name must be closely guarded from dangers from without.

In this sense, argues Derrida, the Nambikwara already possess writing, for they have already invented *erasure*: “If writing is no longer understood in the narrow sense of linear and phonetic notation, it should be possible to say that all societies capable of producing, that is to say of obliterating, their proper names, and of bringing classificatory difference into play, practice writing in general.”⁷ In other words, the suppression of a sign indicates that a complex semantic system is already in place, even if an unwritten one. In fact, the element of erasure is the *defining* gesture of writing, since that act alone produces what Derrida terms *arche-writing*: “From the moment that the proper name is erased in a system, there is writing, there is a ‘subject’ from the moment that this obliteration of the

⁵ Lévi-Strauss (above, note 2), 300.

⁶ Derrida (above, note 1), 106.

⁷ Derrida (above, note 1), 109.

proper is produced, that is to say from the first appearing of the proper and from the first dawn of language."⁸ Derrida goes on to argue that obliteration and writing cannot exist without each other: writing (in all its guises) is inherently violent, and its "invention" among the illiterate Nambikwara necessarily concludes with that gift of violence returning like a boomerang to its hapless inventor Lévi-Strauss.⁹

Derrida's description of "The Writing Lesson" as a *scène* not only recasts Lévi-Strauss' anthropological discourse as a type of drama, but in fact reinforces a metaphor employed by Lévi-Strauss himself. In his curious chapter "The Apotheosis of Augustus," the anthropologist begins by questioning his motives as an anthropologist and his decision to abandon his home for years at a time in order to pursue fieldwork under wretched conditions. Besides facing a generally hazardous daily routine, he has also to contend with the fickleness of a tribe that may or may not approve of his presence. At a particularly difficult stop on Lévi-Strauss' journey, at Campos Novos, a local tribe disappears without a word, leaving the anthropologist bored, restless, and pensive. He decides to wait for the tribe's return, again contemplating the choices that had propelled his itinerary. Finally, Lévi-Strauss turns to a surprising activity to pass the time: ". . . I had the idea that the problems bothering me could provide the subject-matter of a play. It was as clear in my mind as if it had already been written."¹⁰ Even more startlingly, Lévi-Strauss' play, "The Apotheosis of Augustus," takes the form of *classical* theater, as inspired through Corneille's toga-drama *Cinna*. The protagonist of Lévi-Strauss' play, Cinna, returns to Rome after "ten years of adventurous living" in order to re-integrate himself into the society which he had earlier fled; described as "happy only among savages," this character is an obvious metaphor for Lévi-Strauss himself. Upon his return, Cinna joins a palace plot to assassinate the emperor Augustus, and the drama becomes increasingly oneiric, replete with garrulous eagles, copulating butterflies, and an impressive third-act Armageddon.

Through it all, Cinna/Lévi-Strauss explicitly frames his human condition within the parameters of ancient tragedy: "To fill the emptiness of the endless days I would recite Aeschylus and Sophocles to myself; I became so permeated with certain lines that now, when I go to the theatre,

⁸ Derrida (above, note 1), 108.

⁹ For a Derridean analysis of the relationship between writing and gifts, see Zsuzsa Baross, "The (False) Gifts of Writing," *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 435-448.

¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss (above, note 2), 378.

I cannot appreciate their beauty any more."¹¹ Cinna in effect *lives* Greek tragedy: he therefore obtains little pleasure in *viewing* it. Lévi-Strauss leaves his play incomplete—like a classical fragment—and in fact apologizes for its inclusion in the next chapter: "The only justification for the dramatic fable described in the preceding chapter is that it illustrates the mental disorder to which the traveller is exposed"¹² However (oddly) Lévi-Strauss justifies the inclusion of the play, "The Apotheosis of Augustus," neatly paves the way for Derrida's later appropriation of "The Writing Lesson" as a dramatic episode; "The Writing Lesson" becomes, then, just one chapter, one scene, in a larger drama that links the invention of writing to the invention of violence, with Lévi-Strauss himself cast as both hero and fool.

Palamedes' Writing Lesson

Derrida could just as easily have cited the Greek myth of Palamedes in his elucidation of this fundamental connection between invented writing and invented violence—if only Euripides had not anticipated him. Indeed, the myth of Palamedes parallels, in broad outline, Lévi-Strauss' adventures among the Nambikwara, although the range of the myth engenders considerably more complexity. Whereas Lévi-Strauss' narrative is succinctly expressed within the scope of a few pages, Palamedes' myth is spread over a number of fragmented sources. I shall begin, therefore, by reassembling the violently shattered narrative of Palamedes, and then examining how this Greek inventor of writing confronts (as Derrida would say) the originary violence of writing.

The Greek warrior Palamedes is himself the inventor and victim of this violence: he is an Iliadic hero who has been violently erased from the *Iliad*. Unlike Achilles, Ajax, Odysseus, and the other warriors at Troy, Palamedes has no Homer to sing his praises; Palamedes' tale—a wondrous, strange story—must instead be woven from the shreds of narrative that have managed to survive a virtual mythical *damnatio memoriae*. As an epic hero excised from epic, Palamedes represents a lacuna incarnate. Or, rather, he dwells on the peripheries of texts—flitting futilely outside, say, the *Iliad* (a text which resolutely denies him re-entry). Moreover, though he was the protagonist of four tragedies, Palamedes has been largely unwritten from a history of Greek drama, ceding pride of place to such luminaries as Oedipus, Medea, and Orestes. One might say Palamedes was never written there in the first place. As I shall demonstrate, there is a certain poetic justice (if no other kind) to Palamedes' posthumous travails. His literary

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss (above, note 2), 380.

¹² Lévi-Strauss (above, note 2), 383.

Nachleben remains a fitting epilogue to a life concerned through and through with the twin processes of invention and erasure.

Palamedes' signal accomplishment as a hero was to invent writing, the medium, he boasts, of abiding memory; his signal accomplishment as a victim, however, was to be blotted out by the same invention. In this way, Palamedes unwittingly self-destructs, or (as will become apparent) self-deconstructs. Though he boasts of the veracity of his written *sêmata*, "signs," Palamedes discovers, only too late, the possibilities for play (or deceit) inherent in the semantic gap between signifier and signified: like Lévi-Strauss' Nambikwara chief, Palamedes' rival Odysseus invents forgery and thereby exploits writing's potential for destruction. The myth of Palamedes therefore introduces the invention of writing alongside the invention of obliteration, a curious bifurcation of the consequences of written *sêmata*.

The saga of Palamedes and his adventures at Troy enjoyed in fifth-century Athens a certain vogue. All three major Greek tragedians exercised their powers in bringing to the stage this hero's complex tale, a story rife with the very *desiderata* of tragedy: a brilliant, vainglorious hero; an equally sharp but unscrupulous villain; and a story that combines an incisive inquiry about justice with an equally deft investigation into the origins of written *sêmata*.¹³ The loss of these plays—nearly total—necessitates a degree of guesswork concerning the details of the Palamedes myth.¹⁴ The narrative arc, however, remains clear: Palamedes introduces writing to a writing-less people and in so doing becomes a casualty of that writing.

In the ancient tradition, Palamedes is just one of many gods and heroes proclaimed as "the inventor of writing"; Palamedes' particular story

¹³ Besides the canonical three tragedians, the *Suda* notes that the playwright Astydamantes also composed a *Palamedes* (now entirely lost).

¹⁴ The two major reconstructions of the Palamedes myth are both attempts to place the *Palamedes* within the larger framework of Euripides' *oeuvre*. François Jouan gives a helpful overview of the entire Palamedes saga in his chapter "La Campagne Avant L'Iliade: Palamède" from *Euripide et Les Légendes des Chants Cypriens* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966), 339-363. Similarly, Ruth Scodel builds on Jouan's interpretation in her own chapter on *Palamedes* in *The Trojan Trilogy of Euripides, Hypomnemata* 60 (1980). Both scholars stress that their conclusions are by necessity speculative, given the nature of the fragmentary evidence. Timothy Gantz helpfully catalogues the available source evidence in his entry on Palamedes in *Early Greek Myth*, vol. II (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1993), 603-608. A briefer reconstruction may also be found in Dana Sutton, *The Lost Sophocles* (Lanham: U Pr of America, 1984), 97-100; also helpful is the bibliography in Zsigmond Ritoók's article *Zur Trojanischen Trilogie des Euripides* (*Gymnasium* 100 [1993]: 109-125), especially 117, n.25.

is unusual, however, because of its lengthy, tragic, *dénouement*.¹⁵ Other rivals for the title of “first alphabetizer” include the singer Orpheus (Ps.-Alcidamas 24), the Egyptian god Theuth (Plato, *Phaedrus* 274d, as discussed below), the hero Kadmos (Nonnus 4.259-264) and a medley of luminaries culled by the indefatigable mythographer Hyginus:

The Fates—Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos—invented seven Greek letters: ABHTIΨ <. . .>; others say that Mercury invented them from the flight of cranes, which form letters as they fly; Palamedes the son of Nauplius likewise invented eleven letters <. . .>; Simonides invented four (ΩΕΖΦ); and Epicharmus invented two letters, Π and Ψ. (Hyginus 277)

Hyginus’ analysis is a game attempt to reconcile conflicting versions of writing’s invention: for Hyginus, each figure (or trio of figures) is responsible for *part* of the alphabet instead of the whole system. It is certainly true that an alphabetic set may accrete or delete letters over time. A system of Greek notation that is missing, however, eleven of its letters (over a third of its set!) will not adequately convey the range of sounds needed to express the language, and it is probable that Hyginus here conflates a number of discrete myths concerning the invention of writing. The Vergilian commentator Servius, also grappling with the problem of the history of the alphabet, hesitates to enumerate which eleven letters Palamedes invented, but amusingly expresses confidence that this hero discovered at least the aspirates θ φ χ (commentary on *Aeneid*, 2.81). In any event, the tales of Palamedes’ alphabetic prowess appear to have an early origin; the first mention of Palamedes’ exploits of grammatical invention appears in Stesichorus’ *Oresteia*, a reference that indicates an archaic date for the formation of one version of Palamedes’ tale.¹⁶

Intriguingly, the tale of Palamedes is itself a multiform one, possessing variants that both include and exclude the elements of writing. Palamedes first enters the Troy narrative during Agamemnon’s draft of able Greek soldiers to besiege Troy; wily Odysseus, feigning madness to avoid this draft, quite nearly succeeds in avoiding the Trojan war altogether.

¹⁵ Jasper Svenbro notes that there are at least a dozen named inventors of the alphabet in the scholia to Dionysius Thrax (*Anecdota Graeca* 2.774, 781-786 [Bekker]); Svenbro himself analyzes the “invention of writing” (and in particular the myth of Aktaion) in *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1993), 8-9 and 81-86.

¹⁶ Στεσίχορος δὲ ἐν δευτέρῳ Ὀρεστείας . . . τὸν Παλαμῆδην φησὶν εὐρηκέναι [sc. τὰ στοιχεῖα]. (Stesikhorus, fr. 34B, [213, Page]) “Stesikhorus in the second book of his *Oresteia* says that Palamedes invented letters.”

Yoking together an ox and a horse, he ploughs his land with salt, and thereby provides proof positive of insanity: grounds for dismissal from military service. Palamedes, suspicious of Odysseus's madness, devises a cunning plan; he kidnaps Odysseus' infant son, Telemakhos, and hurls the child in front of Odysseus' plough as his father farms the land. Odysseus drops his disguise in order to save his son, and harbors from that day forward an undying grudge against Palamedes.¹⁷ Apollodorus' introduction to this version of the tale, "Palamedes the son of Nauplios proved the madness *false*," (Παλαμήδης δὲ ὁ Ναυπλίου ἤλεγξε τὴν μανίαν ψευδῆ), emphasizes Palamedes' uncanny ability to discern true from false (*pseudos*), actual versus apparent—the nucleus of what will turn out to be Palamedes' triumph (and his downfall). Palamedes' later struggles with the written sign will demonstrate the limits of his gifts of perception.

Thus the first clash between Palamedes and Odysseus occurs in Ithaka, and Palamedes emerges the victor—at least this time. At Troy, Odysseus plots a murderous revenge. The two extant versions of Palamedes' "writing-less" death point naturally enough to Odysseus as head conspirator. Dictys Cretensis, for instance, records that Diomedes and Odysseus tricked Palamedes into searching for gold at the bottom of a well at Troy. Once Palamedes had descended into the earth, the duo suddenly stoned Palamedes to death (*De Bello Trojano* 2.15). A variation of this tale likewise features death by the hands of Odysseus and Diomedes. Pausanias records that Palamedes finds his death at sea: "As I have learned from reading the *Cypria*, when Palamedes was busy with a catch of fish, Diomedes and Odysseus murdered him" (Pausanias 10.31). A surviving Attic calyx krater seems to illustrate a version of this maritime death: Palamedes, in the underworld, leans wearily on an oar, presumably the weapon of his own murder.¹⁸ (The marine elements of this version of the myth reappear in the awful revenge exacted on the Greeks by Palamedes' avenging father, Nauplios.)¹⁹

¹⁷ Or so goes the usual version of the tale; for a complete list of sources, see James Frazer, *Apollodorus: Epitome* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1921), 147, on Apollodorus 3.7. In Apollodorus' own version, Palamedes goes so far as to snatch Telemakhos from Penelope's arms!

¹⁸ Attic calyx krater, dated to 440 BCE, and now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (catalog number 05.258.21).

¹⁹ Apollodorus (*Epitome* 6.7-9) relates that after unsuccessfully arguing in Troy for justice on behalf of his son Palamedes, a distraught Nauplios returns to the mainland and sends up deceiving beacon signals for the Greeks as they return home (thereby shipwrecking them with false *sēmata*). In the meantime, he had, for extra measure, traveled throughout the mainland inciting the wives of Greek warriors to turn to adultery (including, fatefully, Klytemnestra).

In terms of the poetics of myth, these two writing-less accounts of Palamedes' death are relatively straightforward. The myth of the well—with the promise of gold as catalyst for murder—plays on ancient themes of greed and bribery.²⁰ In a foreign land, Palamedes is lured by the attraction of gold and receives his just desserts, even if it is at the hands of so-called friends. Palamedes' death while fishing, by contrast, perhaps reflects traditions in which Palamedes saves the army from starvation by inventing the science of food rationing. Odysseus, jealous of Palamedes' cunning (and mindful also of Palamedes' victory in Ithaka) maliciously dispatches Palamedes while he is discharging the very duty for which he received popular acclaim, a cure for hunger. In both variations, Odysseus' murderous accomplice, Diomedes, performs his conspiratorial rôle in nearly Iliadic vein, obediently following Odysseus' lead, as in the Doloneia. Outnumbered and outwitted by Odysseus and his thug companion, Palamedes meets his death with little fuss.

But there is yet one more twist to the tale, one important for examining ancient attitudes towards writing and communication, and how the narrative of writing's invention might itself spawn multiple narratives (such as Derrida's narrative of Lévi-Strauss). One might expect the more involved and complex traditions of Palamedes to focus on the *toil* required to discover writing: how Palamedes gradually intuits a connection between voice and symbol, and how he perseveres through the gradual, painstaking process of creating the actual *sêmata*. The performance tradition of Palamedes' tale, however, is surprising in its choice of emphasis. The drama of Palamedes elides entirely the *process* of discovery and concentrates instead on the *narrative effect* of writing, the bloody aftermath, how writing turns ineluctably to violence and thus, in the end, destroys its inventor. In other words, the invention of writing produces its own narrative—a Frankenstein story—with a far greater emphasis on the rampage of the monster than on Dr. Frankenstein himself.

For the playwrights, Palamedes is the first, and largely tragic, hero of semiotics.²¹ Ajax might be known for his physical might, and Achilles for his speed; but Palamedes' talents are of a different sort, both more cerebral and quicksilver. He possesses the uncanny ability to make sense of what appears to be chaos; he imposes order on randomness and thereby creates meaning from what appears meaningless. It is his skills as a semiotician that attract

²⁰ Carolyn Higbie has suggested *per litteras* that the well may be a mythical reflex of a *tholos*-tomb, and that the death of Palamedes here reflects the taboo of robbing the grave.

²¹ Marcel Detienne analyzes the correspondences between Palamedes' invention of symbols and Orpheus' invention of "voice" in "L'écriture inventive (entre la voix d'Orphée et l'intelligence de Palamède)," *Critique* 475 (1986): 1225-1234.

both admiration and his ruin. I use the word semiotician—and indeed the word *sêma*—in the sense employed by Gregory Nagy in his collection of essays concerning the poetics of Greek myth. Nagy argues for an essential connection in Greek myth between the concept of the sign (*sêma*), and the concept of cognition (*noêsis*): the *sêma* is that which is alternately *encoded* and *decoded* by the *noos*, the reasoning faculty of the mind. Crucially, a *sêma* may *only* be decoded within a logical matrix: “[A] true recognition of the sign, a true *noêsis* of the *sêma*, can be achieved only by recognizing the internally coherent system of signals [I]n order to recognize the baleful *sêmata* that were scratched by Proitos on the tablet that the hero Bellerophon took with him to the king of Lycia (VI 168/ 176/ 178), the king has to show their relation to the other *sêmata* in a *system* of markings and the relation of these markings to a set of meanings.”²² So it is not that Palamedes merely invents *sêmata*—indeed, *sêmata* are as old as the *noos* itself—but that he invents (or discovers) the relationships *between* individual *sêmata*, their matrix or system. Therein lie his triumph and his fall.

In Sophocles' *Nauplios*, a play concerning Palamedes' father, a character (presumably Nauplios himself) catalogues Palamedes' considerable semiotic achievements at Troy:

οὗτος δ' ἐφηῦρε τεῖχος Ἀργείων στρατῶ,
σταθμῶν, ἀριθμῶν καὶ μέτρων εὐρήματα
τάξεις τε ταύτας οὐράνιά τε σήματα.
κάκειν' ἔτευξε πρῶτος, ἐξ ἑνὸς δέκα
κάκ τῶν δέκ' αὖθις ἦρε πεντηκοντάδας
καὶ χιλιοστῦς, καὶ στρατοῦ φρυκτωρίαν
ἔδειξε κἀνέφηνεν οὐ δεδειγμένα.
ἐφηῦρε δ' ἄστρον μέτρα καὶ περιστροφάς,
ὕπνου φύλαξι πιστὰ σημαντήρια
νεῶν τε ποιμαντήρσιν ἐνθαλασσίοις
ἄρκτου στροφάς τε καὶ κυνὸς ψυχρὰν δύσιν.
(Lloyd-Jones, *Nauplios*, Fragment 432)²³

This man devised the wall for the Argive army; his was the discovery of weights, numbers, and measures; these battle lines; and the signs [*sêmata*] of the heavens. And more—he was the first to count from one to ten, and so to fifty, and so to a thousand. He showed the army how to create a beacon, and he unveiled things that had earlier been obscure. He discovered the measurements of the stars and their revolutions, faithful signs [*sêmantêria*] for those who guard while others sleep;

²² Gregory Nagy, “Sêma and Nôêsis: The Hero's Tomb and the 'Reading' of Symbols in Homer and Hesiod,” in *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1990), 206-207.

²³ Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles: Fragments* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1996). Lloyd-Jones employs the numbering system of Stefan Radt's *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, though with his own adjustments to the text.

and for the shepherds of ships upon the sea, he discovered the revolutions of the Bear and the chilly setting of the Dogstar.

Obviously, Palamedes is a semiotician *par excellence*; he is adept at rearranging small units of meaning into larger, more complex arrangements, always emphasizing their interconnections. Individual bricks, once properly rearranged, form walls and fortifications; individual, abstract units of thought, properly arranged, form the basis of mathematics and equations; solitary soldiers form battle lines, τάξεις (itself a concept meaning "arrangement"); and individual flares of a beacon, once properly spaced, transform random luminous events into the basic constituents of communication. As the passage from Sophocles indicates, Palamedes does not, at first, invent so much as *reveal*: he reveals the "not-apparent" (οὐ δεδειγμένα) meaning of things by re-ordering them into a new, comprehensible symbolic framework. He groups the *sêmantêria* of the stars into a system that now he (and others) can understand: constellations. Moreover, this grouping allows him to impart *additional*, layered, meaning to the stars; they are now guides—indices—to weather and to distance.

A second, higher level of Palamedes' inventiveness inheres in his power to devise other types of organizing principles, a sort of meta-organizing. A fragment from Aeschylus' *Palamedes* features Palamedes boasting of his military inventiveness: καὶ ταξιάρχας καὶ στρατάρχας καὶ ἑκατοντάρχας / ἔταξα, "I arranged commanders and generals and centurions" (Nauck 182). The English translation cannot quite capture the nuances of the verse; Aeschylus creates an arresting parallelism by placing the key phoneme ταξ- in the second syllable of each line, thereby cleverly emphasizing the root meaning of this phoneme: "careful arrangement." Palamedes avoids the expected verb εὑρον (from εὕρισκω "I discover") and instead concentrates on the tactile: he arranges those who will in turn arrange others (ταξι-άρχας). Even the concept ἑκατοντάρχας, "centurion," has everything to do with ordering, since it denotes men who are in charge of others, grouped into squadrons of one hundred. In essence, Palamedes devises hierarchy, a sophisticated tool for the acquisition and manipulation of knowledge.

When Palamedes transplants his notion of military tactics to a flat gaming board, he comes one step closer—in the Greek tragic tradition—to inventing writing (and to inventing his own death, though by a different sort of game). The famous depiction of Ajax and Achilles playing a board game—such as on the archaic bilingual vase at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts—generates its artistic impact by juxtaposing two real soldiers, Ajax and

Achilles, with their metaphorical counterpoints, the gaming board pebbles.²⁴ The invention of this table war game is attributed to Palamedes by many sources, not the least of whom is Sophocles: καὶ πεσσὰ πεντέγραμμα καὶ κύβων βολαί, "and [he invented] board games with five lines and throws of the dice" (*Nauplius* fr. 429 Lloyd-Jones).²⁵ This board game represents an important step in the evolution of Palamedes' powers; he takes his knack for organizing *real* soldiers and substitutes symbolic *sêmata* instead.²⁶ By creating a system in which pebbles *symbolize* warriors and the table *symbolizes* a battle field, Palamedes makes clear the metaphorical underpinnings of his miniature war game. But he also makes evident, for the first time, the essentially random association between any given marker and its referent—an important point to be seized upon by Euripides.

From inventing games to inventing writing is not so great a leap: both systems rely on the manipulation of symbols upon a matrix that, in turn, imparts to the symbols a sense of order and concomitant meaning.²⁷ Still, the invention of writing is a significant achievement, and Palamedes, as portrayed by Euripides, loudly and plainly boasts of his efforts:

τὰ τῆς γε λήθης φάρμακ' ὀρθώσας μόνος,
ἄφωνα φωνήεντα συλλαβὰς τιθεῖς

²⁴ Boston 01.8037. The two sides of the vase are attributed to the Andokides Painter and the Lysippides Painter.

²⁵ An intriguing collision of Palamedes' penchant for board games and mathematics comes from an inscribed abakion, as noted by Orion 127.3: εὗρε σοφὸς λιμοῦ με παραιφασίην Παλαμῆδης, "Palamedes the clever discovered me, a comfort against hunger." One presumes that the abakion board served as a device by which πεσσοί, "tokens," representing rations were arranged to represent the equal distribution of food during a siege, another invention attributed to Palamedes. (A less likely, though possible, scenario is that playing with the tokens took a soldier's mind off his hunger.)

²⁶ See the opening of poem 70 in the Latin Anthology (quite possibly the fragment of a larger epyllion): *has acies bello similes cano, quas Palamedes / constituit*, "I sing of those battle lines similar to war—the ones that Palamedes discovered."

²⁷ Purcell neatly elucidates the relationship between writing and the concept of "ordering" ("Roman Urban Society and the Game of *Alea*," *Past and Present* 147 [1995]: 32-33): "The disjoining of number, space, and letter, characteristic of our thought, should not be uncritically superimposed on other cultures. In fact, the *abecedarium* makes passable the pathless (it has unilinear sequential ordering) and gives order to what had lacked it before. The sense of ordering, therefore, whether it is indicated by points, spaces, or letters, is part of a single set of ideas attested clearly in the Palamedes myth." Robert Frost links the invention of writing and numbers in the second part of his poem *Kitty Hawk*: " 'Twas a radio / voice that said, 'Get set / in the alphabet, / That is, ABC, / Which someday should be / rhymed with 1 2 3 / On a college gate.'"

ἔξευρον ἀνθρώποισι γράμματ' εἰδέναι
 ὥστ' οὐ παρόντα ποντίας ὑπὲρ πλάκῃς
 τάκεῖ κατ' οἴκους πάντ' ἐπίστασθαι καλῶς,
 παισὶν τ' ἀποθνήσκοντι χρημάτων μέτρον
 γράψαντας εἰπεῖν, τὸν λαβόντα δ' εἰδέναι.
 ἃ δ' εἰς ἔριν πίπτουσιν ἀνθρώποις κακὰ
 δέλτος διαιρεῖ, καὶ κ' ἐγὼ ψευδῆ λέγειν.

(*Palamedes*, fr. 578, Nauck.)

I alone put in order the remedies [*pharmaka*] for oblivion, creating syllables out of consonants and vowels. I discovered for mankind knowledge of writing [*grammata*], so that someone across the expanse of the sea can know clearly at a distance everything that is happening at home, and so those who are dying can read the reckoning of the will to their sons, and the recipient shall know it too.²⁸ The tablet will pass judgment on those matters in which men have fallen into bitter strife, and a tablet does not allow one to lie.

Palamedes' accomplishment is literally singular: he *alone* (μόνος) discovered the secret of writing language, of making the astounding cognitive leap from sound to symbol and back again. Moreover, unlike the versions in which Palamedes discovers just a few letters, the hero here discovers the entire system: he puts in order (ὀρθώσας) all necessary constituents for the employment of writing. He invents a new, specific grouping of σήματα, which he descriptively terms γράμματα, literally "things drawn" or "things inscribed." Palamedes immediately recognizes the single greatest asset of this invention: that a sound may now be suspended in both space and time, captured by a symbol that arrests its temporal fleetingness. Palamedes traces a few possible uses for this invention, such as epistles for communication (thereby overcoming the obstacle of space)²⁹ and wills for

²⁸ The so-called "daggers of desperation" surround text that is problematic either palaeographically or logically. Though it is fairly clear that line 7 of the fragment refers to a will (thereby signifying writing that survives time, as opposed to the writing that survives spatial transfer, lines 5-6), the syntax of the received text is difficult.

²⁹ Palamedes' speech here exactly corresponds to a "logocentric" view of the world, as articulated by Barbara Johnson in her introduction to Derrida's *Dissemination* (trans. Barbara Johnson [Chicago: Chicago U Pr, 1981]—to be considered later in this essay): "Writing . . . is considered by the logocentric system to be only a *representation* of speech, a second substitute designed for us only when speaking is impossible. Writing is thus a second-rate activity that tries to overcome distance by making use of it: the writer puts his thought on paper, distancing it from himself, transforming it into something that can be read by someone far away, even after the writer's death" (ix). For Palamedes, speech is primary; writing secondary; ironically, Palamedes at his later trial will be unable to refute orally the evidence proffered by this "secondary" signifier.

inheritance (thereby overcoming the obstacle of time).³⁰ But when Palamedes ruminates over the value of writing in a forensic context, Palamedes' justified boasting turns to self-delusion. He first claims that when men fall into a bitter dispute, the δέλτος, "tablet," will decide the case. Then, in one of Euripides' most archly crafted lines, Palamedes trumpets that writing does not allow one to lie.

Euripides included the verse to stress the terrible irony of Palamedes' eventual death by *grammata* that not only allow lying, but perform the activity with aplomb. At this point in the myth, the parallels with Lévi-Strauss' writing lesson become more pronounced. Palamedes' invention of writing in turn invents a cunning rival, only this time it is Odysseus, and not a Nambikwara chief. Odysseus thus re-enters the narrative as the foil to Palamedes' superhuman powers of invention, ready to murder not by oar, but by *gramma*. As Archilokhos once sang, "The fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog just one: one good one" [fr. 201]—and a bristly Odysseus springs his one good trick with a vengeance. Hyginus provides us with the fullest account of Palamedes' downfall:³¹

Because he had been tricked by Palamedes, the son of Nauplius, Odysseus schemed all day long how he might kill Palamedes. Finally, he hits upon a plan. He sent a soldier to Agamemnon to tell him that Odysseus dreamed that the camp should be moved for one day. Agamemnon, thinking this is true, orders camp to be struck; Odysseus, however, secretly at night, plants a great mound of gold where Palamedes' tent used to be. Likewise, he gives a written letter [*epistulam conscriptam*] to a Trojan captive to take to Priam. However, he had sent out one of his soldiers to kill the captive first not far from the camp. The next day, when the army returned to the camp, a certain soldier found on top of the Trojan corpse the letter that Odysseus had written. He took it to Agamemnon, and the letter said "To Palamedes from Priam," and it promises to Palamedes some gold if he should betray the Greek camp. It was the same amount of gold Odysseus had hidden under the tent. When Palamedes was ordered before the king, he denied the

³⁰ M. T. Clanchy notes that the development of the written will in medieval cultures constituted a crucial step in the transition to a literate society: "Until the thirteenth century the will was an essentially oral act, even when it was recorded in writing By the end of the thirteenth century a man's final will no longer usually meant his wishes spoken on his deathbed, but a signed and sealed document The validity of the will now depended primarily upon its being in a correct documentary form and not on the verbal assurances of the witnesses. This is another illustration of the shift from memory to written record between 1100 and 1300" (*From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* [Oxford: Oxford U Pr, 2nd edition, 1993], 254).

³¹ A scholiast to Euripides' *Orestes* 432ff. provides a briefer account of Palamedes' death and includes a number of different details. The list includes a joint conspiracy of Agamemnon, Diomedes, and Odysseus as well as the curious detail that the cabal compels a Trojan native to write the incriminating letter in Phrygian script, Φρυγίους γράμματα, presumably to make the forgery appear authentic.

betrayal; however they went into his tent and dug up the gold, which Agamemnon credited as soon as he saw it. By which deed, Palamedes, though innocent, was killed by the entire army because of the trick of Odysseus. (Hyginus 105)

Palamedes may have invented writing, but Odysseus invents forgery.

It is a precocious first effort.

Indeed, Odysseus' epistolary mischief highlights the "flip side" of Palamedes' discovery: that writing is not only a *pharmakon* or cure for forgetfulness (by permitting the transcription of history) but also the enabler of fiction (by permitting the transcription of fantasy). In this way, the myth neatly folds back on itself—Palamedes defeated Odysseus' persuasive fiction of insanity, and Odysseus in turn destroys Palamedes with a persuasive fiction of treason. In each instance, the hero is conquered at his own game. Odysseus is famously πολύτροπος "many-sided, versatile" (*Od.* 1.1), and exhibits his penchant for personae throughout his epic by adopting at various moments the guises of Cretan, beggar, and so forth; only Palamedes (and to some extent Penelope) can pierce Odysseus' adopted mask. Similarly, it takes an Odysseus to discover the fatal flaw in Palamedes' latest invention, that is, the essentially arbitrary association of symbol with voice. It may be, as Palamedes asserts, that writing cannot lie—but its writer can.

When Palamedes invented the board game, with its *sēmata* representing soldiers in formation, the hero crafted rules which fixed the meaning of the markers' arrangement *independently* from its players. If any players at the table were substituted—if, say, Achilles and Ajax were replaced by two other opponents—the meaning (and therefore) interpretation of the symbols on the board would remain the same. However, crafty Odysseus discovered that writing is, in fact, a different game from chess. The meaning of writing depends on who is playing; the text takes its cue from where it came from and where it is going to, and the interpretation of the reader must take into account the *transmission* of the signs as well as the signs themselves, the system of spatial as well as phonetic transfer. The words "To Palamedes from Priam" must be interpreted differently if they are not in fact from Priam—or to Palamedes. Odysseus, a chief among the Greeks, gambles on the hunch that no one of the untutored masses will call into question the veracity of writing.

It turns out to be a safe gamble. Although Palamedes apparently makes a spirited defense before an assembly of the Greeks, the rigged evidence is simply too damning. Agamemnon, unhappily, believes everything he reads and pursues the charge of treason with a vengeance;³²

³² The act of Agamemnon's reading (and duping) is made explicit in Apollodorus' *Epitome* (3.8): Ἀγαμέμνων δὲ ἀναγνούς καὶ εὐρών τὸν χρυσόν, τοῖς συμμάχοις αὐτὸν ὡς προδότην παρέδωκε καταλεῦσαι, "Agamemnon, having read the letter and found the gold,

the assembled chieftains then sentence Palamedes to death. This punishment provides the occasion for one final irony: λίθοις φονεύεται Παλαμήδης, "Palamedes is killed by stones" (scholiast to Euripides' *Orestes* 432), as the hero is overwhelmed by an orchestrated avalanche of potential game-board σήματα. The mythical Dr. Frankenstein reaps at last the grim harvest of his most famous invention.

The myth of Palamedes, itself a narrative about the encoding and decoding of *sēmata*, encodes within it one more systematic connection: the Derridean link between writing and violence. Every version of Palamedes' life concludes with the hero's gruesome death by some implement of destruction. In each variation, a trick or ruse precipitates Palamedes' death: in the earliest two versions, the trick is accomplished through *oral* distraction and misinformation. When, in drama, the Palamedes myth innovates and incorporates the component of writing, it is that structural slot—the slot of deception—that writing fills. As constructed by the dramatic myth, writing enables the production of the *pseudos*, of the false; it is a trick, a ruse, a phantasm that facilitates, in the end, the employment of violence. This is a grim view of the science of the *gramma*: far from validating Palamedes' Pollyanna hopes for a beneficial technology, the tragedians, particularly Euripides, highlight instead the darker aspects of this new semiotic system.

In this manner, the myth of Palamedes (as staged in a scene by Euripides) neatly parallels the myth of Lévi-Strauss (as staged as a dramatic *scène* by Derrida), and one could, if so inclined, discern in Euripides the precursor of deconstruction, or at least of grammatology. Euripides is fascinated (as Derrida after him) by the intrinsic lability of the sign, and each critic dissects his respective story to prove the mutability of the written word in its broader semantic context. But it is not just that the sign is slippery in context, but that it is slippery in and of itself; we turn now to an another intriguing parallel between the writings of Derrida and the very slippery language that encodes the myth of Palamedes.

Euripides' Pharmacy

Derrida's work *Dissemination* is itself disseminated in two parts. The first part, originally published in the philosophical journal *Tel Quel*, consists of Derrida's famous essay "Plato's Pharmacy," a deft deconstruction of Plato's early dialogue *Phaedrus*. Focusing on just one word, *pharmakon*, Derrida explores the section of the *Phaedrus* that is dedicated to the myth of writing's invention as filtered through Egyptian (and Platonic) legend. Derrida observes that the myth of the god Theuth illustrates not only

handed him over to his comrades to be stoned to death." It is on the basis of Agamemnon's *reading* of the letter that the charge of betrayal continues to be investigated.

writing's capacity for preserving memory, but paradoxically its opposite, its power of violent *erasure*, of obliteration. Touted as a *pharmakon mnêmês*, a "cure for memory," writing in fact enables and destroys recollection at the same time; the slippery concept *pharmakon* therefore embodies the Derridean emphasis on indeterminacy in language. "The common translation of *pharmakon* by remedy—a beneficent drug—is not, of course, inaccurate. . . . Its translation by 'remedy' nonetheless erases, in going outside of the Greek language, the other pole reserved in the word *pharmakon*."³³ That other pole is, as Derrida goes on to argue, "poison," the opposite of remedy, itself signified by the same word (*pharmakon*) yet meaning precisely the *opposite* of its other pole. "There is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The *pharmakon* can never be simply beneficial."³⁴

As support for his assertions, Derrida points to the myth of Theuth in Plato's *Phaedrus*. This myth parallels Palamedes' narrative in many particulars, especially with respect to the powers accorded the act of writing. Socrates begins his narrative by relating Theuth's donation of the gift of writing to a skeptical King Thamus:

Socrates: . . . [T]he name of the divinity was Theuth. It was he who first invented numbers and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing (*grammata*). . . . Thamus [the king] questioned him about the usefulness of each one; and as Theuth enumerated, the King blamed or praised what he thought were the good or bad points in the explanation. Now Thamus is said to have had a good deal to remark on both sides of the question about every single art (it would take too long to repeat it here); but when it came to writing, Theuth said, "This discipline (*to mathêma*), my King, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories (*sophôterous kai mnêmonikôterous*): my invention is a recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory (*mnêmês*) and wisdom (*sophias*). (*Phaedrus* 274c-e)

Like Palamedes, Theuth is a semiotic jack-of-all-trades, able to juggle multiple inventions of signifiers, such as mathematics and astronomy. Also like Palamedes, Theuth reserves pride of place for his invention of *grammata*, the ultimate symbolic system. Theuth displays understandable enthusiasm for his latest creation. These written *σῆματα*, he argues, not only substitute written symbols for sound, but indeed are a cure (*pharmakon*) for memory, *mnêmê*, itself. Permanent *grammata* substitute for, and thereby remedy, impermanent memory; the invention of writing therefore represents the (re)invention of an elusive concept: deathlessness.

³³ Derrida (above, note 29), 97.

³⁴ Derrida (above, note 29), 99.

But as King Thamus points out (to Derrida's delectation) the *pharmakon* of writing may in fact produce the *opposite* effect of a remedy (and so, in its way, the opposite effect of deathlessness):

And now, since you are the father of written letters, your paternal goodwill has led you to pronounce the very opposite of what is their real power. The fact is that this invention will produce forgetfulness [*lêthê*] in the souls of those who have learned it because they will not need to exercise their memories [*mnêmê*], being able to rely on what is written using the external marks that are alien to themselves rather than, from within, their own unaided powers to call things to mind. So it's not a remedy [*pharmakon*] for memory [*mnêmê*], but for reminding [*hypomnêmê*], that you have discovered. (*Phaedrus* 275a–275b)

Thamus draws a crucial distinction between *mnêmê*, the faculty of memory, and *hypomnêmis*, the process of reminding; the former is internal, cerebral, and desirable, while the latter is external, physical, and vulnerable. Writing, by *displacing* memory, causes memory to wither and thereby introduces its structural opposite, *lêthê*; Derrida notes in this connection, "Whence the *pharmakon*'s two misdeeds: it dulls the memory, and if it is any assistance at all, it is not for the *mnêmê*, but for *hypomnêmis*. Instead of quickening life in the original, 'in person,' the *pharmakon* can at best only restore its monuments. It is a debilitating poison for memory but a remedy or tonic for its external signs, its *symptoms*, with everything that this word can connote in Greek" ³⁵

From this story, Derrida extrapolates Plato's vision of a perfect world, one that banishes all slipperiness, signifying *sêmata*: ". . . what Plato dreams of is a memory with no sign. That is, with no supplement. A *mnêmê* with no *hypomnêsis*, no *pharmakon*." ³⁶ Derrida goes on to argue that this is but a pipe dream; the line between *mnêmê* and *hypomnêsis* is in fact "hardly perceptible" and so Plato's neatly constructed division between "memory" and "recall" itself falls apart at its hardly perceptible seam. All memory requires a supplement, an external agent to invoke and evoke the processes of recall and repetition; writing happens to be the most potent of such *pharmaka*, a mnemonic catalyst. If the line between memory and recollection is blurry, so too then is the line between *pharmakon* and memory, mutually dependent entities; and if the *pharmakon* of writing should *replace* memory, as it eventually must, then writing itself encompasses the power of *erasure* as well as resurrection. ³⁷

³⁵ Derrida (above, note 29), 110.

³⁶ Derrida (above, note 29), 109.

³⁷ For a gentle criticism of Derrida's interpretation of the Theuth and Thamus episode, see G. R. F. Ferrari's *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*

For Derrida, all of this erasing, scratching, recalling, and supplementing necessarily engenders a highly dramatic spectacle: "This pharmacy is also, we begin to perceive, a theater."³⁸ It is now time to return to what Derrida might well applaud as "the play of writing," Euripides' *Palamedes*. Palamedes' life does not end in fact with his death; it concludes with his "pharmaceutical" erasure. I recall to mind Palamedes' fateful boast about the potency of writing: τὰ τῆς γε λήθης φάρμακ' ὀρθώσας μόνος (Nauck² fr. 578), "I alone put in order the *pharmaka* for forgetfulness (*lêthê*)." Compare this boast to Theuth's assertion (274e) above: "I discovered the *pharmakon* for memory (*mnêmê*)." The two lines, juxtaposed, beautifully express the paradoxes inherent in the myth(s) of writing: each figure has invented the *identical pharmakon*, but for one, it is a cure for forgetfulness, and the other, a poison for it—or is it the other way around?³⁹ The tale of Palamedes and his remarkable drug neatly transverses the entire semiotic range of *pharmakon*, from mnemonic benefit to literary erasure.

Like his Egyptian counterpart, Palamedes argues that his pharmaceutical powers can *only* be used for good: a misapprehension he suffers until too late. In his elaborate fantasy speech *Pro Palamede*, the sophistic orator Gorgias imagines a possible forensic defense for Palamedes, now on trial for his life. In a particularly impassioned outburst, Palamedes launches into a catalogue of his sundry achievements: "What other man has so fashioned human life that it may be well-provided for when once un-

(Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1987), 214-222. Ferrari defends Derrida's insistence on the integrity of the episode to the rest of the *Phaedrus* (and indeed to the bulk of Platonic thought); he is less sanguine, however, about Derrida's interpretation of the episode as a self-destructing (or rather, deconstructing) written myth about the myth of writing: "[Derrida] is wrong to think that the affect of the mode of Plato's presentation of the critique is in any way to undermine its content, either considered in its aspect as a point about writing or in its larger metaphysical aspect" (220). Yet myths of writing *do* tend to have a Derridean aspect of self-implosion, of doubling back upon themselves; there is something inherently unstable about a written narrative that explores its own ontology. The literary *dénouement* to Palamedes' tale will make this clear.

³⁸ *Of Grammatology* (above, note 1), 142. Derrida continues his drama-tinged metaphor: "The theatrical cannot here be summed up in speech: it involves forces, space, law, kinship, the human, the divine, death, play, festivity. Hence the new depth that reveals itself to us will necessarily be another scene, on another stage, or rather another tableau in the unfolding of the play of writing."

³⁹ Svenbro (above, note 15), 201, also briefly juxtaposes the two lines; he goes on to criticize Derrida for not emphasizing that a *pharmakon* may be a spoken *logos* as well as a written one: "In a sense, the difference between the *lógos* that is read and the one that is spoken is negligible."

provided, and made orderly from the elements of disorder? Who else has discovered battle lines, crucial for military success; and written laws, guardians of justice; and letters (*grammata*), the instrument (*organon*) of memory (*mnêmês*) . . . ?" (*Pro Palamede* 190). Again, we have Palamedes' insistence on writing as a purely beneficial invention, a technology that allows for the extension and retention of memory. And again, it will be the cunning Odysseus who deconstructs Palamedes' invention and who demonstrates its inherent ambiguities—even after the death of *both* men.

In his second-century C.E. work, *Heroikos*, the second sophistic author Philostratus tackles among other topics the curious disappearance—more accurately, erasure—of Palamedes from accounts of the Trojan war.⁴⁰ The *Heroikos* takes the form of a dialogue between a Thracian vinedresser and a traveling Phoenician sailor who has been blown off course. During the course of the conversation, the vinedresser boasts that his lands are tended to by the local tutelary spirit of Protesilaus, the first hero to die at Troy. Protesilaus, in exchange for the vinedresser's devotion, honors the vinedresser by relating secrets about the heroic past, a past in which the Trojan hero Palamedes plays a significant role. In many respects, Protesilaus' account of Palamedes' adventures matches the received, Athenian tradition (including his inventions of games, rations for famine, military battle lines, and the like). Indeed, at one point, Protesilaus actually quotes a passage from Euripides' *Palamedes*, an intertextual maneuver that demonstrates how Palamedes is as much a literary as mythical construct: even by the second century C.E., his literary corpus is a tissue of tragic quotations.⁴¹ However, Protesilaus does provide two interesting twists to Palamedes' tale, twists that have important implications for the writing—and Derridean erasure—of Palamedes.

Protesilaus' account of the invention of writing differs in one crucial respect from the tragic versions. At some point after Palamedes introduced *grammata* to the assembled forces at Troy, Odysseus notes a flock of cranes flying overhead in formation (itself an occasional *aition* for the discovery of *grammata*). Observing that the cranes were forming letter-like

⁴⁰ Modern critical treatments of the *Heroikos* are few and far between; for a general overview of the work with a particular emphasis on Philostratus' literary antecedents, see the chapter "Hero-Cults and Homer: The *Heroicus*" in Graham Anderson, *Philostratus* (London, 1986), 241-257. Also valuable is the new English translation, with commentary and notes: *Flavius Philostratus: On Heroes*, Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean and Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, trans. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

⁴¹ Preserved as Nauck fragment 588: "O Danaans, you have killed, *killed*, the wisest of all men—a nightingale of the muses, who has never caused harm."

configurations, Odysseus then attacks Palamedes on the grounds of false advertising:

ὁ δὲ Ὀδυσσεὺς ἐς τὸν Παλαμῆδην βλέψας "αἱ γέρανοι" ἔφη "μαρτύρονται τοὺς Ἀχαιοὺς ὅτι αὐταὶ γράμματα εὗρον, οὐχὶ σὺ." καὶ ὁ Παλαμῆδης "ἐγὼ γράμματα οὐχ εὗρον," εἶπεν "ἀλλ' ὑπ' αὐτῶν εὐρέθην· πάλαι γάρ ταῦτα ἐν Μουσῶν οἴκῳ κείμενα ἐδεῖτο ἀνδρὸς τοιούτου, θεοὶ δὲ τὰ τοιαῦτα δι' ἀνδρῶν σοφῶν ἀναφαίνουσι." (*Heroikos* 38.10-11)

Odysseus, glancing at Palamedes, declared "The cranes bear witness to the Achaeans that *they* [the cranes] discovered writing (*grammata*), not you." To which Palamedes replied: "I did not discover writing (*grammata*)—but rather *I* was discovered *by them*. For a long time, the letters (*grammata*) have been lying in the house of the Muses, waiting for such a man as me; the gods reveal such things only through men who are wise (*sophos*)."⁴²

Earlier in this essay, I noted a peculiarity of Palamedes' genius: in general, Palamedes practiced the art of *discovery*, rather than invention; that is to say, he demonstrated the nature of things (of constellations, of brickwork) rather than constructing devices *ex nihilo*. Writing seemed an apparent exception, as Palamedes invented, from scratch, individual *grammata*. Startlingly, in Protesilaus' version of the tale, Palamedes does *not* invent writing. Rather, writing invents *Palamedes*: ὑπ' αὐτῶν εὐρέθην, "I was discovered by *grammata*." Palamedes hastens to add that he means that the gods waited for an appropriate time—and appropriate hero—to introduce *grammata*, and that, therefore, writing existed *before* Palamedes: he is merely the advertiser, the sideshow barker of *grammata*. But that phrase—"I was discovered by *grammata*"—means more than Palamedes intends; the verb εὕρισκεῖν includes notions of both discovery *and* invention. Palamedes is not only *discovered* by writing, he is *invented* by writing.

And therein lies the problem—a man who has been invented by writing may also be subject to the opposite process: un-writing, or Derridean "obliteration" (the term itself a textual metaphor). The *pharmakon* of writing now activates both its semiotic poles when Protesilaus recounts how Palamedes' nemesis Odysseus again finds a novel way to torment Palamedes—even after death. As Protesilaus relates, when Homer suffered from the song-culture equivalent of writer's block, the poet conjured up the ghost of Odysseus to teach him what happened at Troy, or, in other words, to be his inspiring Muse. Odysseus agreed, but on one, troubling, condition:

⁴² Greek text from the edition of Ludo De Lannoy, *Flavii Philostrati Heroicus* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1977).

ἀπιόντος δὲ ἤδη τοῦ Ὀμήρου βοήσας ὁ Ὀδυσσεὺς "Παλαμήδης με" ἔφη "δίκας ἀπαιτεῖ τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ φόνου καὶ οἶδα ἀδικῶν καὶ πάντως μὲν πείσομαί τι, οἱ γὰρ θεμιστεύοντες ἐνταῦθα δεινοί, "Ὀμηρε, καὶ τὰ ἐκ Ποινῶν ἐγγύς, εἰ δὲ τοῖς ἄνω ἀνθρώποις μὴ δόξω εἰργάσθαι τὸν Παλαμήδην ταῦτα, ἡττόν με ἀπολεῖ τὰ ἐνταῦθα· μὴ δὲ ἄγε τὸν Παλαμήδην ἐς Ἴλιον, μηδὲ στρατιώτη χρῶ, μηδέ, ὅτι σοφός ἦν, εἵπης. ἐροῦσι μὲν γὰρ ἕτεροι ποιηταί, πιθανὰ δὲ οὐ δόξει μὴ σοὶ εἰρημένα." αὕτη, ξένε, ἡ Ὀδυσσέως τε καὶ Ὀμήρου ξυνουσία, καὶ οὕτως "Ὀμηρος τὰ ἀληθῆ μὲν ἔμαθε, μετεκόσμησε δὲ πολλὰ ἐς τὸ συμφέρον τοῦ λόγου, ὃν ὑπέθετο."⁴³

With Homer already turning to leave, Odysseus announced "Palamedes takes me to task for his murder; I know I have done wrong and am entirely persuaded of it. Homer, the deliverers of justice here are terrible, and the punishments of the Furies are near at hand. If those above ground do not believe that I have done these things to Palamedes, then I will be tormented less here. Do not then lead Palamedes to Troy, nor employ him as a soldier, nor say that was he was wise (*sophos*). Other poets may speak of him, but it will only seem credible (*pithana*) if it comes from you." This then, stranger, was the agreement between Odysseus and Homer, and although Homer knew the truth, nevertheless he composed many things in agreement with this compact (*logos*).

Poor Palamedes: if there is a fate worse than death, it is to be *de-composed* from epic, the preeminent conduit of *kleos*, "glory," in a song-culture.⁴⁴ Motivated both by envy (*phthonos*) and a spirit of desperation, Odysseus enjoins Homer to alter history itself, or at least history as refracted through the lens of Homer's poetry. Earlier in the *Heroikos*, Protesilaus asserts that Homer did not fictionalize (ὑποτεθεῖσθαι) the Trojan war, but that he largely based his record (ἀπαγγελίαν) on events which were true (ἀληθινῶν) and actual (γεγονότων) (43.4). Odysseus' request is therefore extraordinary: he wishes to alter truth by inventing the first *ellipsis*, the art of *not* writing, the art of convenient forgetfulness. Or, in other words, *lêthê*. Everyone admits that Palamedes is worthy of song (ᾠδῆς ἄξιον, 33.37), but Palamedes' worthiness is not enough to defeat the determination of one hero to erase him from epic.

One tradition even records that Palamedes, like Homer, was himself an ἐποποιός, "a singer of epic." In a startling narrative metonymy, Palamedes' poetic compositions encounter the same sad fate as their

⁴³ *Heroikos* 43.15-16.

⁴⁴ Gantz (above, note 14), 603-4, notes that even heroes who had a *floruit* before the start of the *Iliad* nevertheless managed to be mentioned in the epic: "Homer never mentions this figure [Palamedes], not even in the Catalogue of Ships, although we have seen that the abandoned Philoktetes and the deceased Protesilaus found room there." Palamedes' omission from the epic is indeed glaring, and Philostratus' explanation (as channeled through Protesilaus) is both a witty explication of the problem and a ingenious solution to it.

creator: τὰ δὲ ποιήματα αὐτοῦ ἠφάνισθη ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀγαμέμνονος ἀπογόνων διὰ βασκανίαν. ὑπολαμβάνω δὲ καὶ τὸν ποιητὴν Ὅμηρον αὐτὸ τοῦτο πεπονθέναι καὶ μηδεμίαν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τούτου μνήμην ποιήσασθαι,⁴⁵ "His poems (*poiēmata*) were obliterated by the descendents of Agamemnon on account of envy. I believe that the poet Homer felt identically and so created not one remembrance (*mnēmê*) of this man." In terms of the poetics of myth, Agamemnon's descendents and Palamedes' poems are structurally parallel: each group represents the instrument of immortality for its respective begetter, continuing through perpetuity. By erasing Palamedes' poems, Agamemnon's progeny complete the erasure of Palamedes, a process itself begun by their forefather Agamemnon at Palamedes' fateful trial. If writing is indeed integral to *mnēmê*, then Agamemnon's sons are taking no chances (and no hostages): by destroying the *grammata* of Palamedes, they destroy all memory of Palamedes as well.

Or nearly. And thus I conclude with the paradox with which I began. Palamedes survives his "deaths by writing" by being written—written by Philostratus, written by Euripides, written even by me. Although, like Theuth, Palamedes underestimates the semiotic mischief inherent in *grammata*, ultimately these *pharmaka* provide their own antidote. It is curious (and worthy of another, separate, investigation) that it is the performance medium of drama that first elaborates upon Palamedes' death by writing, and Derrida is doubtless correct to pun mercilessly when speaking in a larger context of the "play of writing." As concerns Palamedes'

⁴⁵ From the entry on Palamedes in the *Suidae Lexicon*, ed. Ada Adler (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1967). Barry Powell, arguing that the Greek alphabet was adapted from a Phoenician script for the sole purpose of transcribing the Homeric poems, makes the startling conjecture that Palamedes was omitted from the *Iliad* because Palamedes was in fact this adapter: "Behind figures of heroic legend often stand real men As for Palamedes, the Greeks especially knew one thing about him: he was so clever that he devised a way to write down Greek speech. We would expect a man to be remembered who through his cleverness did just that, and in Palamedes we may have found the adapter's very name" (*Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* [Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1991], 236). Setting aside the very dubious proposition that heroes are often based on historical figures, it remains unclear why Palamedes, if the adapter, would not then insert himself (or at least his namesake) into the Homeric poems. A more plausible figure in this regard would surely be Demodokos or Phemios, two heroic bards who appear in the songs themselves. Roger Woodard firmly rejects Powell's speculation: "There must have been some moment in time when the very first spark of an idea of using the Phoenician script for writing Greek entered into the mind of some one person; this is probably the only sense in which we can meaningfully speak of a single individual being responsible for the Greek alphabet. Who made what contributions of experimentation and development beyond this moment is an undeterminable matter" (*Greek Writing from Knossos to Homer* [Oxford: Oxford U Pr, 1997], 261 n.17). In this way, Palamedes, as constructed by myth, is the *aition* or "cause" of a phenomenon which is, in the last analysis, undeterminable, and therefore invites a myth.

myth of wayward *grammata*, Euripides' play *is* the thing, and exposes, I believe, some inherent tensions between the forces of literacy and orality in fifth-century Athens, at least as explored by the *polis*' performance traditions. In the longer diachronic view, the transmission of Palamedes' narrative embodies a number of quintessentially Derridean contradictions, including the complex symbiosis between the processes of recall and oblivion. This symbiosis is most obviously present in Philostratus' account of Palamedes' erasure from the *Iliad*, an account which, as we have seen, both recalls Palamedes' life and yet reaffirms its obliteration. In this way, even after his violent death, Palamedes continues to learn—perhaps begins even to teach—his own darkly instructive "writing lesson."

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