HERMES' HERB:

Homer's *moly* and Early Modern Iatrophilology

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Homer was an epic poet – and a mine of information. To early modern readers, medical and pharmaceutical (if not magical) knowledge appeared to be more than present in the Iliad and the Odyssey. A Homeric plant most heatily discussed was the herb moly (μῶλυ) which Hermes gave to Ulysses in order to protect him from the incantations of Circe (Od. X, 302–307). This paper will explore some of the most significant debates dedicated to this Homeric plant in early modern iatrophilology.

Famous and Incognito: Homer's *moly* in a Long and Well-established Tradition

> The poet speaks the truth, though he speaks in enigmas, though he speaks in fables, though he speaks in verse. I follow the enigmas, I investigate the fables, nor shall I be seduced by his song.[1]

Some *loci* of classical literature have a larger fate than others. The fascinating *pharmakon* of *moly*, this "herba notissima iuxta et ignotissima" (most famous as well as unknown herb),[2] which Hermes gave to Ulysses in order to protect him from the incantations of Circe in Homer's *Odyssey*, is indeed one of them. An analysis of some of its echoes in Renaissance and early-modern intellectual thought must remain incomplete.[3] Like other Homeric *pharmaka* discussed since antiquity, e.g Helen's equally famous *nepenthes*,[4] *moly* had almost as many interpretations as there were interpreters, and was

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[1] Maximus of Tyre1804, 103; cf. also Stephanus 1557, 225; Triller 1766, 37.

[2] Reimmann 1728, 159; Cf. also: Triller 1766, 61.

[3] This is also an excuse for all the aspects of *moly* that are intentionally or ignorantly left out in this paper.

[4] Cf. Wallura 2020.

permanently tied up between literal sense and allegorical meaning.[5] The fields of early modern knowledge involved in these interpretation, such as botany, medicine, pharmacology, mythology, epic poetry and poetics tackled the problem with multiple (sometimes conflicting) interpretative approaches.

In this paper, I shall consequently narrow the focus on a field of knowledge identified by scholarship as relevant for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but still underexplored, i.e. early modern iatrophilology.[6] As shown by the Homeric passage, the text had easily inspired a commentary tradition characterised by an interpretation of *moly* (μῶλυ) that combined botany (both factual and magical) with philology and philosophy, weighing these approaches against each other:

> ὣς ἄρα φωνήσας πόρε φάρμακον ἀργεϊφόντης
> ἐκ γαίης ἐρύσας, καί μοι φύσιν αὐτοῦ ἔδειξε.
> ῥίζῃ μὲν μέλαν ἔσκε, γάλακτι δὲ εἴκελον ἄνθος:
> μῶλυ δέ μιν καλέουσι θεοί: χαλεπὸν δέ τ᾽ ὀρύσσειν
> ἀνδράσι γε θνητοῖσι, θεοὶ δέ τε πάντα δύνανται.
>
> So saying, Argeiphontes [i.e. Hermes] gave me the herb, drawing it from the ground, and showed me its nature. At the root it was black, but its flower was like milk. Moly the gods call it, and it is hard for mortal men to dig; but with the gods all things are possible. [7]

This description of *moly* is complicated and ambiguous. In *Od*. X, 287, where Hermes warns Ulysses of the incantations of Circe, showing how to prevent them, *moly* is called a *pharmakon* (φάρμακον), i.e. 'drug, remedy, medicine, poison', or – apt against the imminent threat from Circe the sorceress – even 'charm'.[8] All these meanings of *pharmakon* are continuously present in the episode involving Ulysses, Hermes, and Circe (*Od*. X, 274–574). *Pharmakon* is used not only to refer to the good substance (φάρμακον ἐσθλόν) of *moly* but also as a collective term for magic potions and harmful substances of the *polypharmake*[9]/*herbipotens* Circe.[10] Even the sorceress herself refers to her

[5] Cf. Stannard 1962; Kaiser 1964; Siede 2012.

[6] According to Jaumann 2001, iatrophilology (*iatrophilologia* in Latin-language sources) involves an intersectional competence in both medicine/botany and philology, practiced by a series of scholars especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ranging from bare metaphor to hermeneutic concepts. According to Jaumann 2001, the relationship between naturalists and philologists was to be reciprocal: for example medicine could incorporate philology in order to answer questions of medical history, and arts (including philology), could use medical and botanical arguments to reach better understanding of different types of texts (cf. Jaumann 2001*, passim*, especially 159).

[7] Hom. *Od*. X, 302–306. The translation is taken from Murray 1946, 367.

[8] Wahrig 2009, 517.

[9] Kaiser 1964, 200.

[10] Boet. *Cons*. 4, *Carm.* 3, Möller 2013, 196.

potions and charms by the term *pharmakon*.[11] This observation did, of course, not escape the numerous ancient and medieval interpreters and commentators of this episode, inducing them to assign to it a variety of meanings both allegorical and literal.[12]

The tension between the natural and somewhat magical character of *moly* turned into a major issue over centuries, triggering early modern Paracelsian and Hermetic interpretations. But already starting with the Pseudo-Plutarchian *Essay on the Life and Poetry of Homer* and Politian's *Oratio in expositione Homeri* (1498), both early modern poetics and study of Homeric poetry were highly influenced by the idea of the poet's ancient wisdom pointing both explicitly and allegorically to different "truths".[13] However, it soon became a commonplace that *moly* must have been an entity with a tremendous pre-emptive effect on the human body. Ancient and early modern interpretations were grounded in the belief that natural substances, such as plants, and magical practices were not in contradiction with each other.[14] Ancient botanical or medical works would also refer to magical implications if it suited the character of a given plant. It is not exaggerated to state that Homer's *moly* is the archetype of such substances in European classical tradition.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the first important post-Homeric account of *moly* should be found in Theophrastus, *History of Plants* (IX, 15, 7), which provides a botanical description of a plant termed *moly*, complete with indications on its use against spells and magical arts.[15] Such authors as Dioscorides, Pliny and Galen give rather inconsistent accounts of *moly* based on the interpretational traditions they were indebted to.[16] Pliny, for instance, is one of the few (but influential) sources for *moly* as a concrete antidote against poisons.[17] The Stoic Cleanthes appears to be the first extant source for an allegorical interpretation of *moly*. Other ancient authors, such as Maximus of Tyre or Themistius, followed him, interpreting *moly* not as a plant, but as *logos*, *arete*, *paideia*, *lexis*, or as a rational entity of some kind.[18] But apart

[11] Cf. the different uses in *Od*. X, 287, 292, 302, 304 , 317, 392, and 394.

[12] For a comprehensive account of Roman and Byzantine antiquity, see Stannard 1962.

[13] Ford 2006; not to mention the impact of the Homeric comments of Eustathius of Thessalonica (*c*. 1110–1195) on scholarship well into the seventeenth century, cf. e.g. Postel 1700, 366–390.

[14] It would exceed the limits of this paper to discuss here the terms *natural* and *magical* in ancient, medieval and early modern thought. For more context, see Copenhaver 2010, Eming & Wels 2020 and Frietsch 2018.

[15] Theophr. *Hist.plant.* 9, 15, 7; Stannard 1962, 256–257.

[16] Dioscorides, *Mat. med.* 3, 47; Plin. *NH* 25, 79, 127; Gal. *De simpl. med. temp. et fac*. 7.

[17] Stannard 1962, 270.

[18] See, Kaiser 1964, 209; Möller 2013, 197 with n. 29.

from these allegorical interpretations, *moly* was often the object of botanical, medical, and natural historical reasoning combined with magical implications.[19] Homer's account, according to which it is a root with botanical (even anti-magical) qualities, was taken for granted. The task for early modern interpretations, as we shall see, was to synthesise these naturalistic and allegorical meanings of *moly* into one distinct entity.

Since the beginning, the main problem for any interpretation was, however, to identify *moly*'s powers and the way it worked. How was Ulysses able to do or prevent things from happening to him with the aid of this Hermetic "herb"? A careful reader of Homer has to admit that the text is not clear, giving room for many an explanation. The only information gauged from the passage is Hermes handing *moly* to the hero and giving him some advice on how to interact with Circe.[20] Apart from this, it may be asked what Ulysses was actually doing with the plant. Did he ingest it? Was he just carrying it around? Homer remains oddly silent about it.[21] The following examples will highlight only some of the debates regarding *moly* in early modern scholarship, situated at a hazy intersection of medicine, botany, Hermeticism, Paracelsism, and poetics, which may be subsumed under the term iatrophilology.

"Magna et vetus est eruditorum concertatio": Humanists and Botanists on *moly* (Mattioli, Guilandino, Gessner)

It is not surprising that mid-sixteenth-century humanist debates on *moly* should not only have focused on the Homeric text, but regarded the whole interpretational tradition since antiquity. Thanks to Homer's Western *editio princeps* (1488) supervised by Demetrius Chalcocondyles, the subsequent Aldine reprints, and the Latin translation of the *Odyssey* by Simon Lemnius (1549), humanist scholarship around 1550 was already aware of *moly*'s interpretative trickiness.[22] Furthermore, the edition of Eustathius's commentaries on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, published in four volumes by Nicolaus Majoranus in Rome in 1542–1550, had favoured the reading and

[19] A good example for what triggered early modern scholarship here might be the link between Homer's *moly* interpreted as garlic and the early modern discussions on the so-called garlic effect, describing a phenomenon of antipathy and sympathy. According to this theory, iron coated with garlic would lose its magnetic effect. A Ulysses armoured with garlic (=*moly*) could protect himself from Circe's advances, keeping her at distance. Cf. the very instructive article by Sander 2020, in particular 538 and, again, Stannard 1962.

[20] Hermes instructs Ulysses to approach Circe without fear, threatening her with his sword in order to force her to re-transform his companions into humans and let them all set sail from her island, see Hom. *Od*. X, 295, 320–324).

[21] I owe this keen observation to Schlemm 2018, 53–76, in particular 66.

[22] Homerus 1488; Lemnius 1549, 283–284.

interpretation of controversial passages in Homer,[23] as had the influential scholia on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* attributed to Didymus Chalcenterus.[24] In addition, several visual representations of *moly*, mostly by artists and emblemists of the Italian Renaissance, such as Giovanni Stradano or Andrea Alciato, based on humanist accounts and often raising questions on the Homeric text.[25] Crucial for sixteenth-century humanist interpretations of *moly* is the distinction between *Moly Homericum*, i.e. *moly* in the *Odyssey*, and uses of the term in other authors. The early modern arguments listed below heavily rely on the adoption (or rejection) of this distinction by the authors in question.

One important sixteenth-century humanist debate on this matter involved Pietro Andrea Mattioli (1500/1501–1577), Melchiorre Guilandino (1520–1589), and Conrad Gessner (1516–1565). Humanist medicine, botany, and pharmacology entered a new stage of professionalisation in the mid-sixteenth century. This is reflected in several chairs for botany at early modern academies and universities.[26] The Italian humanist Pietro Andrea Mattioli (1500/1501–1577), botanist and later personal physician to emperors Ferdinand II and Maximilian II, studied medicine in Padua and Perugia. One of his most important and most influential works was his well-known herbal, the *Compendium de plantis omnibus*.[27] Another influential work of his was the repeatedly re-issued and extended commentary on Dioscorides' *Materia medica*.[28] There, Mattioli, discussing *moly*, states that the accounts in Homer, Dioscorides, and Pliny do not quite match. While Homer describes *moly* as having deep roots in the soil, Dioscorides calls it a small, bulbous root resembling an onion or garlic. Pliny, who seems to consider the plant an onion-like root, contradicts himselfs by mentioning a fairly long root system. In addition, he maintains that the plant also grew in Campania, Italy. Mattioli is quite aware of discrepancies between the *Moly Homericum* and the *Moly Theophrasti, Dioscoridis*, or *Plinii*.[29] So far, he concludes, he could not find a plant either in Italy or elsewhere that would match the description of *moly* as it occurs in Dioscorides.[30]

Instead, Mattioli suggests that plants might have been mixed up. He bases this hypothesis on a problem in the textual transmission of Dioscorides. There is, he argues, a certain resemblance between Dioscorides' μῶλυ (*moly*) and

[23] Nicolaus Majoranus 1542–1550.
[24] Didymus Chalcenterus 1535.
[25] See especially Caciorgna 2006.
[26] Findlen 1994; Touwaide 2008.
[27] Mattioli 1571.
[28] Mattioli 1554.
[29] Cf. Mattioli 1554, 349–350, on Πήγανον ἄγριον/*ruta silvestris* and Μῶλη/ Μῶλυ/*Moly*.
[30] Mattioli 1554, 350.

the plant μύλη (*myle*) encountered in Galen.[31] Dioscorides' *moly* would in fact be a simple transmission error for Galen's *myle.* Mattioli quotes the Latin translation of Dioscorides' description of *moly* describing the plant's capacity to contract a woman's matrix if combined with a lily ointment.[32] Clearly, as the humanist suggests, some copyists (*librarii*) might have mixed up the two terms due to the resemblance of μετὰ ἰρίνου μύρου ("cum irino ungento"), the term for lily ointment in Dioscorides, and μετὰ αἰρίνου ἀλεύρου ("cum farina loliacea"), the term for darnel-meal in Galen.[33] Mattioli adds that the factual difference between *moly* and *myle* remains, however, unclear.

Obviously, regarding *moly* in Homer's *Odyssey*, many questions remained unanswered. Mattioli did not pursue his analysis of the *Moly Homericum.* Unsurprisingly, the matter was soon tackled by another competent scholar, Melchiorre Guilandino/Melchior Wieland (*c*. 1520–1589).[34] It is well documented that Mattioli and Guilandino were constantly quarrelling over Guilandino's good connections to the well-known physician, anatomist, and botanist Gabriele Falloppio (1523–1562), who had been appointed to a professorship at the university of Padua in 1551. In 1557 Guilandino published his *De stirpium aliquot nominibus vetustis ac novis epistulae duo*, a pamphlet criticising the alleged mistakes of Mattioli's commentary on Dioscorides' *Materia medica.* It consisted of an exchange of letters with the famous physician and botanist Conrad Gessner (1516–1565).[35]

More than Mattioli, Guilandino refers to the age-old debate on *moly* ("magna et vetus est eruditorum concertatio", the consensus of the the learned men is great and old), emphasising, in accordance with Pliny, Homer's profound wisdom, "unicus ingeniorum omnium fons et victor" (sole source and conqueror of all wisdom).[36] The numerous allegorical interpretations of Homer's *moly*, also known as *salving root* in Lycophron's *Alexandra*, did not escape Guilandino: Suidas, Eustathius, and Erasmus had already defined it ἀλληγορικῶς (allegorical) with its black root symbolising hard work and its white blossom standing for absolute virtue: *tranquilitas animi*.[37] But, as

[31] Mattioli 1554, 350.
[32] Mattioli 1554, 350.
[33] *Ibid*. Also cf. Galenus [1547], 489.
[34] Born in Königsberg, he had travelled to Calabria as a vagrant herbalist in his youth, and had just finished his studies in Bologna in 1555. He, too, was a physician and a botanist well acquainted with Mattioli's newly published work on Dioscorides. For additional references to Guilandino and his work, see Herrmann 2015.
[35] Guilandino 1557; also reprinted in Guilandino 1558; for the full context of these two editions of the pamphlet and the connections between Mattioli, Falloppio, and Guilandino, see Herrmann 2015, 3. While the text of Guilandino's account on *moly* is identical in both editions, the 1558 one lacks Gessner's account. In the following I shall use the 1557 edition.
[36] Guilandino 1557, 18.
[37] *Ibid*.

Guilandino immediately adds, there was also much obscenity in allegorical interpretations, such as the *carmina priapaea*, where a dark root tapering into a milk-white blossom is identified as *mentula* (penis).[38] Guilandino the botanist is inclined to explore other plants having possibly contributed to *moly*. Firstly, Guilandino attempts to deal with an inconsistency in Theophrastus and Pliny. While Theophrastus' *moly*, contrary to the Homeric plant, could easily be dug out, Pliny repeated the Homeric description, even calling the plant a very long root. According to Guilandino, however, both authors were wrong. Inspired by the scholiast commentary attributed to Didymus, he gave a completely different reading to the Homeric text, in particular its underlying botanical meaning: digging out the root was not hard in itself, but doing so meant endangering one's own life.[39]

Consequently, Guilandino argues, Homer must have been referring to *Cynospastus* (whiterose, *Rosa sempervirens*), well known from accounts by Aelianus and Flavius Josephus. Despite Guilandino trying to move the debate from Dioscorides to the Homeric *moly*, he obviously stretches the Homeric sense of 'difficult to dig for mortals' to the extreme. Since it is dangerous to dig out *Cynospastus*, as Guilandino asserts, people would have worn amulets for protection and consecrated the soil where it grew. In the absence of amulets, humans would use dogs to extract the plant, condemning the animals to death.[40] Even Guilandino's discussion of the botanical qualities reprises Mattioli's account, for instance the use of the plant as an ointment against menstrual cramps.[41] Furthermore, *Cynospastus* is efficient against possession by impure spirits (*spiritus immundi*).[42] It becomes obvious that Guilandino – in contrast to Mattioli – attempts to interpret the characteristics of the Homeric *moly* as both botanical and preventive (in the sense of anti-magic). Guilandino's familiarity with recently published alchemical, magical and Hermetic literature is confirmed by the catalogue of his private library dating from the end of his life.[43]

This brings us to Conrad Gessner's reply included in the 1557 edition. Gessner is much more cautious, looking for a middling solution between Guilandino and Mattioli. His own account sounds more like an indirect reminder for Guilandino to reconsider his own arguments: Guilandino is

[38] *Ibid*.; cf. *Carm. priap.* 68. This parodic imitation of *moly* is inspired by the Homeric text. In *Od*. X, 295 Hermes instructs Ulysses to approach Circe threatening her with his sword (cf. above n. 21). When he does so, Circe, recognizing him, asks him to sheathe his sword (Hom. *Od*. X, 330–334).

[39] Guilandino 1557, 19.

[40] *Ibid*. 19–20; Ail. *Var.* 14, 27; also cf. Gerard 1597, 829–833, especially 832.

[41] *Ibid*. 19.

[42] *Ibid*. 20.

[43] Cf. Hermann 2015, 9.

wrong in criticising Gessner for his quest of truth and in accusing him of sympathising with *chymistae*, the most stupid of humans.[44] While Gessner could be referring here to sixteenth-century alchemists, he is most probably criticising Guilandino's interpretation of *Cynospastus* as a contender for Homer's *moly* without providing convincing arguments. According to Gessner, it is far-fetched to try to reconcile the accounts in Homeric scholia (the dangers of extracting *moly*) with those regarding the harvesting of *Cynospastus* in Aelianus and others. All of the proposed plants are completely unknown. In case they exist, it is difficult to import them from the Far East for examination. Some of the (seemingly exaggerated) qualities ascribed to the plants, e.g. those of *Cynospastus*, Gessner argues, are likely to be *miracula* never occurring in nature.[45]

In 1561 Mattioli published his *Epistolarum medicinalium libri quinque*, addressing some of the issues raised by Guilandino and Gessner. He does not mince his words regarding Guilandino, who, he says, seems to be dwelling in Cimmerian darkness.[46] Mattioli's, just as Gessner's, reply regarding Guilandino's *Cynospastus* as Homeric *moly* is rather short, since neither saw any strict resemblance to any known plant. Guilandino's claims regarding *moly*'s magical qualities are not even commented on. Instead, Mattioli limits himself to botanical description, arguing that Guilandino is wrong as regards *Cynospastus* and its resemblance to a plant described by Flavius Josephus. Does not Homer, Mattioli asks, state that *moly*'s root is black whereas Flavius' plant has a red root of the colour of the sunset? Guilandino's claim is more of a fairy-tale (*fabulosa*), not even worth contemplating.[47]

Debates on Homer's *moly*, obviously, were not fought on concepts of science and poetics. While all three scholars were acting as botanists and philologists alike, Gessner and Mattioli did not rule out magical interpretations of the Homeric passage. In the years following this controversy Guilandino embarked on a research trip to the Levant, Egypt, and Palestine, financed by the university of Padua and the Republic of Venice, in order to verify the information provided by Dioscorides. He discovered many materials, all lost due to his being imprisoned by pirates in the harbour of Cagliari. His friend Falloppio paid the ransom. In 1561, safely back in Italy, Guilandino was first appointed director of the botanical garden of Padua and, in 1567, university professor. Egyptian plants remained an important field for

[44] Guilandino 1557, 25.
[45] *Ibid*. 43.
[46] Mattioli 1561, 159.
[47] *Ibid*. 171–172. For the description of Βαάας in Flavius Josephus, often compared with *Cynospastus*, see Jos. *Bell. Iud.* 7, 6, 3.

him, though he was never to find *moly*. Guilandino's work was, however, to influence subsequent interpretations of *moly*, focusing on Egypt.[48]

Magical Plant Power: Homer's *moly* between Hermeticism, Paracelsism, and Galenic Medicine (Conring, Borch)

Very early on, the Western classical tradition linked magic to Egypt.[49] In *Od*. IV, Homer mentions that in Egypt Helen had received from Polydamna, Thon's wife, a potion containing a most powerful *pharmakon*. In Egypt

> the earth […] bears greatest store of drugs, many that are healing when mixed, and many that are baneful; there every man is a physician, wise above human kind; for they are of the race of Paeeon.[50]

Neither early modern exponents of Hermeticism and Paracelsism nor those of Galenic medicine and Aristotelianism failed to address these magical and/or pharmaceutical allusions to potent plants. While sixteenth-century humanists were mainly concerned with *moly*'s identity, seventeenth-century scholars were much more interested in its purported powers. How could a plant and antidote, such as the Homeric *moly*, have such an effect on the human body? This question was, of course, connected to several debates on magic in early modern Galenic medicine, Hermeticism, and Paracelsism.[51] Due to the complex nature of the Hermetic and Paracelsian accounts of Homer's *moly*,[52] I shall focus here on the controversy between Hermann Conring of Helmstedt and Ole Borch of Copenhagen in the second half of the seventeenth century.

One of the most important exponents of Galenic medicine and institutional Aristotelianism as practiced in the middle of the seventeenth century was the Lutheran professor Hermann Conring (1606–1681) of the Helmstedt *Academia Julia*.[53] His most famous work, which was reprinted several times, *De Hermetica Aegyptiorum vetere et Paracelsicorum nova medicina* (1648), provides a series of accounts of debates on the magical power of plants, which, according to Conring, a convinced anti-alchemist and anti-Paracelsian, belonged to the realm of poetry, not to nature.[54] This claim quickly provoked a reply by Ole Borch (1626–1690), Danish physician, chemist, and polyhistor, who was much more inclined to Paracelsism and

[48] Cf. Sponde 1573, 142 (commentary on the *Odyssey*).
[49] Ebeling 2014.
[50] Hom. *Od*. IV, 228–232; Homerus 1946, 123.
[51] Frietsch 2021.
[52] See, for instance Maier 1620, 124–127; Kircher 1653, 439–441.
[53] On Conring's life and works, see most recently Nahrendorf 2020.
[54] Conring 1648; an in-depth discussion of the seventeenth-century use of the terms *magic* and *magical* would exceed the limits of this article. For further references, see Frietsch 2021.

Hermeticism. It gave rise to several controversies, all concerned with Hermes Trismegistus and the works attributed to him. Conring's and Borch's standpoints were wide apart. For Borch, for instance chemistry was an age-old discipline going back to pre-diluvian Tubalcain, originating in Egypt and then passing on to Greece, whereas Conring followed the tradition according to which Moses had introduced this discipline in Egypt. Borch, for his part, believed Moses to have received his knowledge in Egypt from none other than Hermes Trismegistus.[55] It is obvious that these standpoints also influenced Conring's and Borch's interpretations of Homer and Hermes' herb.

In 1668 Borch initiated a controversy in his dissertation *De ortu et progressu chemiae*.[56] In 1669 Conring reacted with a second edition of his *Hermetica medicina*, published under a slightly different title and complete with an *apologeticus* addressing Borch.[57] Listing Orpheus, Pythagoras, Empedocles, and many others said to have excelled in "magical medicine" (*magica medicina*),[58] Conring also mentions Homer and his famous *moly*. Homer's familiarity with magical arts, Conring says, is brought out by the *Odyssey*. As Pliny said, magical arts were the origin of the poet's works. Though Conring does not doubt the power of *moly*, he argues, this power does not work through magic, since healing wounds or alike through incantations is magical. This last point is doubted by Conring.[59] A few lines later he also makes it clear that a "magical power" (*magica vis*) attributed to a plant by some *magi* or idolaters cannot be considered natural (*naturalis vis*). Since *moly* belongs to magic in Homer's poetry, it must be interpreted as part of poetical fiction, Conring argues. It is a magical plant, regardless of how inaccurate this might seem from the point of view of natural sciences. Considering the presence of incantations in the Homeric passage, identifying *moly* with a real-world plant is more than questionable.

Ole Borch did not agree.[60] Since 1660 he was a *professor extraordinarius* lecturing in a very practice-oriented way not only on botany and chemistry, but also on poetics. Borch's extensive output in the field of poetics was well received even beyond the university of Copenhagen.[61] In his reply, he urges

[55] For the wide-ranging seventeenth-century debates on Hermes Trismegistus, ancient Egyptian wisdom, and the Mosaic tradition, see e.g. Abbri 2000, in particular 218, with special regard to Conring and Borch; Law 2021 (forthcoming).

[56] Borch 1668.

[57] Conring 1669. For the *apologeticus* against Borch, see *ibid.* 421–447.

[58] Conring 1669, 107.

[59] *Ibid*. 107.

[60] On Borch's life and works, see Abbri 2000, Fink Jensen 2000 & 2006, Johnson & Maynard 2013 and Roling 2021.]

[61] Cf. e.g. Borch 1683.

Conring to stop trying to impose views that had not been verified. According to Borch, physicians of the past have shown that plants may legitimately (*legitime*) defeat diseases induced by incantation.[62] Physicians and astronomers, such as the Paracelsian Bartholomaeus Carrichter, had stated that black hellebore or *hypericum* seemed most efficient especially as regards diseases of the mind. There is no reason, says Borch, to attribute simple *superstitio* to Homer. Has the commentary tradition not shown that *moly* being "difficult to extract for mortals but not for gods" could also mean it being simply hard to find? Indeed, is it not hard to find most of these plants which are reported to be most effective against mental diseases? Galen himself had stated it on several occasions. The true nature of *moly* aside, while the practices and ceremonies described by the poet were, of course, superstitious, the thing (*res*), i.e. the plant, must have worked in a natural way (*naturaliter*)?[63]

As shown by Conring and Borch, iatrophilology could be practiced in different ways. While Conring seemed to have opted for a strict distinction between poetry and natural philosophy, Borch adheres to the commentary tradition on Homer, seems to believe that natural phenomena might be identified in poetical descriptions of magical practices. The problem of the combination of concepts belonging to poetry, on the one hand, and natural philosophy, especially medicine and botany, on the other, became a core issue in subsequent iatrophilological debates on the Homeric *moly*.

Between Medicine and Poetics: *Homerus Medicus* and *Moly Homericum* (Wedel, Brendel, Triller)

By the end of the seventeenth century it was clear that iatrophilological readings of Homer needed adequate concepts of poetry. How could the long-lasting tradition of interpreting Homer be combined with medical and botanical reasoning? Here again, Eustathius and his commentaries on Homer were most influencial for early modern iatrophilologists and their interpretations of *moly*. In one of his three short *propemptica* on Homer's *moly* published in quick succession in 1713,[64] Georg Wolfgang Wedel (1645–1721) argues that there are two meanings of this Homeric remedy: the "physical anti-aphrodisiac" and the "moral antidote" or "moral preservative".[65] This, of course, follows Eustathius and established early modern poetics. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are suspected to contain

[62] Borch 1674, 130.
[63] Borch, *ibid.*
[64] Wedel 1713a; 1713b; 1713c.
[65] Wedel 1713a, 4.

allegories which have to be explained both *physice* and *moraliter*.[66] Homer's supposed moral allegories were, of course, already well-received at early modern universities, academies or gymnasia. Telling cases, such as the Lutheran theologist and schoolmaster in Schneeberg, Urban Gottfried Siber (1669–1741), and his oration *Moly, Hermetis herba* published in 1699, come to mind.[67]

A likewise odd example, however, for the mainly physical reading of Homer is provided by Adam Brendel (d. 1719). He studied physics as well as poetics in Wittenberg and published in 1700 an academic dissertation with the programmatic title *De Homero medico*.[68] Homer, he says, did not only possess knowledge in diverse medical fields, such as epidemiology, surgery, and pharmacy,[69] but also in the therapeutics of mental diseases. These mental diseases, Brendel assures, can sometimes even be cured by songs (*carminibus sanantur*), as Homer himself would confirm.[70] It is to be noted that accounts like these, prominent in the Lutheran academic milieu, were not so much indebted to the Paracelsian or Hermetic tradition than to traditional Aristotelianism and Galenic medicine which, by the end of the seventeenth century, had already incorporated some of the experimental approaches proposed by more recent philosophical tendencies, represented by Boyle, Gassendi, Descartes and several others.

However, Georg Wolfgang Wedel's *propemptica* on Homer's *moly*, as mentioned above, are most revealing in regard to the combination of physical and moral interpretations and the idea of both readings providing holistic allegories. Since Homer's poems are a *Geschicht-Gedicht*, i.e. a story which is only probable, but far from true, Wedel proposes that it is in particular the duty of botany and medicine to dismantle the mythological elements of plants

[66] See, for instance, the preface in Postel 1697, 2r–2v; Postel 1700.

[67] Siber 1699, a3r–3v: "[…] secretos et reconditos Vatis sensus, qui fictionum velamento, egregias maximasque ad mores spectantes doctrinas, tegere et obvelare studuit" ([…] the poet's secret and hidden intentions, who, through the veil of fiction, aims to cover and hide the honourable and highest moral instructions). Somewhat later, a4v: "Eustathius […] tradit omnem Odysseae Homericae historiam magis ad formandos instruendosque mores, quam tradendae veritatis […]" (Eustathius […] teaches that the whole story of Homer's Odyssey aimed more at forming and instructing morals than transmitting the truth).

[68] Brendel & Oertel 1700.

[69] Brendel & Oertel 1700, 20–24. Brendel and Oertel argue, knowledge of the miasma theory and the spread of epidemic diseases appears to be present in Homer, e.g. as regards cleaning houses out of precaution and disease prevention (e.g. at the end of Hom. *Od.* XXII). According to them, knowledge of surgery seems to inform Machaon's treatment of his battle wounds (Hom. *Il*. IV, 223ff.) and pharmacy, of course, seems essential to Helen's famous potion in Hom. *Od*. IV, 219ff.

[70] Brendel & Oertel 1700, 18. Their arguments are based on Hom. *Il*. IX, 186ff. The matter continued to interest Brendel, see Brendel & Pohle 1706.

described in poetry.[71] Therefore, Wedel argues, in botanical terms *Nymphaea alba* would be a perfect match for *moly*, since it has all the required qualities. As it is floating on water, it is hard to grab. Interestingly enough, as it could also counteract sexual desire, Wedel reckons, it appears to be a perfect gift for Ulysses to face Circe, a creature of manifold charms.[72] The physical interpretation, Wedel implies, has to serve the underlying moral sense of the passage as well. The physical description and the adjoining moral implications of the *pharmakon* have to be compatible. When *herbipotens* Circe transforms Ulysses's companions into pigs, she does not literally turn them into animals but only makes them mad and stupid by her pharmaceutical skills. Following the influential interpretation of Natale Conti's *Mythologiae* (1551) of the episode of Ulysses and Circe, for Wedel the companions act morally like animals while not literally being transformed into pigs by magic.[73] Hermes' herb, this gift to Ulysses, Wedel says, is nothing else than the ability to keep one's emotions and desires under control, i.e. *temperantia*.[74] This very same state of mind, this fortitude, he adds, would also preserve the human mind against malevolent incantations – a concession of Wedel's to the rather Paracelsian accounts by Borch and others.[75] These moralising iatrophilological argumentations, one should note, were not taking place in the margins of scholarship, especially since Wedel, Brendel, and others were core members of the *Academia naturae curiosorum*, which was to become the learned society *Leopoldina*.

Only three years after Wedel another German scholar, although a much younger one, provided a synthesis of the iatrophilological discussions on Homer's *moly*. Daniel Wilhelm Triller (1695–1782) studied philosophy and medicine in Leipzig, where he published a dissertation entitled *Moly Homericum detectum cum reliquis ad fabulam Circaeam pertinentibus* (The detected Moly of Homer with other adjoining Circean fables, 1716).[76] This title, of course, was meant to be programmatic. Triller was also interested in the combination of medicine and poetics. He did not only have a successful

[71] Wedel 1713c; Wedel 1713b, 2; The term *Geschicht-Gedicht* used by Wedel is taken from the well-received treatise by Sigmund von Birken (Birken 1679) who had used the same term to classify the heroic poems of Homer and Vergil, but also more recent poetic genres, such as *Romanzi* or *Romans*.

[72] Wedel 1713a, 5–6.

[73] Wedel 1713b, 5.

[74] Wedel 1713c, 3. Ulysses later sharing the bed with Circe does not seem contradictory to Wedel. After all, Ulysses manages to persuade Circe to transform his companions back into humans and let them leave the island. The sex with Circe, according to this interpretation, is sheer calculation on Ulysses' side to reach his goals.

[75] Wedel 1713c, 5–6.

[76] Triller & Wagner 1716; re-issued and revised in Triller 1766. This shows Triller's life-long interest in iatrophilology.

medical career, but made himself also known as editor of poetry by such a well-known German author and theoretician of poetry as Martin Opitz, among others.[77] Frequently referring to the interpretative tradition of Homer's *moly*, Triller joins in with Wedel in stating that Servius, in his commentary on Vergil, had presented Circe as being nothing else than a beautiful "noble courtisan" or "prostitute" (*nobile scortum/meretrix*) with singing skills.[78] An eighteenth-century Lutheran physician could of course not fail to warn his readers of the dangers of libidinous and voluptuous practices, out of both moral and medical reasons.

Then again, why Hermes, the messenger of gods, and not Apollo, who was much more closely linked with knowledge and healing crafts? The answer, Triller says, is obvious: in Matthew (Mat 17:5), the Christian God would have appeared to Jesus and the Disciples. And as Diogenes Laertius and Maximus of Tyre had shown, the one and only God was polyonomous, having manifested himself in antiquity under several names, including that of Hermes, who was referred to by expressions such as εἱμαρμένης (decreed by fate), ἔρυμα (safeguard) or ὀχύρωμα (fortress). Therefore, argues Triller, Homer's choice for Hermes is well placed, not so much because of the link to λόγος (as concrete speech), but to λογισμόν (reasoning power), which seems to be the underlying divine gift handed over to Ulysses by the plant *moly*. The Christian God saves mankind through natural gifts and enables it to protect itself against external dangers.[79] For Triller, this is not surprising, and fits contemporary poetics as regards Homeric poetry. Even Milton in his most famous *Paradise Lost* used archangel Michael as God's messenger who provides Adam with a cure for his optic nerve, thus enlightening him both literally and figuratively.[80]

But what plant did actually provide the allegorical template for *moly*? Triller's conclusion, at first, seems surprising. There was never any plant called *moly*, as Wedel would already have noted.[81] However, contrary to Wedel, for Triller the physical *schema* for the *sensus allegoricus* and *sensus moralis* cannot be *Nymphaea alba*. Triller's arguments underline the botanical differences between the *nymphaea* and the *moly*. Homer, in his poetic manner, says something while meaning something else ("aliud

[77] On this issue, see the instructive paper by Worms 2018.

[78] Triller 1716, 6–8; Triller 1766, 40–42.

[79] Triller 1766, 59–60.

[80] See, Otten 1970, 362 and 365, who convincingly analyses Milton's *rue* as a reference to Homer's *moly*.

[81] Triller 1766, 63. For the sake of my argument I shall leave out Triller's accounts of diverse etymologies of *moly* and the problem of divine language as elaborated on in the commentary tradition.

proponit, aliud autem supponit").[82] Contrary to Wedel, Triller suspects Homer of referring to black hellebore (*Elleborus niger*) as the physical template for the allegorical interpretation of *moly*.[83] Is it not black hellebore which, like *moly*, has the power to clear the mind and strengthen one's wits as, for instance, Erasmus and others had maintained?[84] Furthermore, by hellebore, Triller concludes, nothing else could be meant than *prudentia* (sharpness of mind). What Ulysses needed was not so much *paideia* (as proposed by Maximus of Tyre and others), than plain σοφία (cleverness) or βουλή (counsel): a good piece of advice on interacting with the enchanting sorceress Circe.[85] Finally, this would make black hellebore such a good candidate for Hermes' herb, since that god (and allegorically the real Christian God) is supposed to provide counsel to humans in difficult situations.[86] This, Triller concludes, can only be the *sensus latens*, the meaning lying underneath Homer's *moly*: black hellebore as a perfect match on natural, moral, and allegorical levels.

Conclusion: Multiple Readings and Projections

Homer's *moly*, as has been shown, came a long way into early modern scholarship. Starting in Renaissance humanism, scholars became not only readers of but scholars doing research on Greek literature.[87] The ancient and medieval Greek and Latin commentary tradition using Homer's *moly* for medical, botanical information laid the foundation for several iatrophilological readings of Homer in the following centuries. In the seventeenth century the Paracelsian and Hermetic approaches as well as

[82] Triller 1766, 75.

[83] Triller 1766, 75.

[84] Triller 1766, 76: "Hic igitur sciendum, antiquitus primum Ellebori nigri ad levanda mentis et capitis vitia ipsumque ingenium acuendum, et sapientiam augendam et roborandam, fuisse usum, ut Erasmus loquitur" (Therefore, here one has to know that in ancient times the use of black hellebore was first to lessen the vices of the mind and head, to sharpen one's wit itself, and to increase and strenghten one's good sense, as Erasmus says).

[85] Triller 1766, 79.

[86] Triller 1766, 81 sums it up quite nicely: "Brevibus: voluit Homerus hacce in fabula, homines tum caeco impetu, in voluptates ruentes; tum iisdem temperanter et cum ratione utentes proponere, atque simul indicare damna et pericula priorum, quos in pecora versos fabulatus: et posteriorum securitatem et inconcussam quietem, sub effigie Ulyssis prudentia et temperantia a Deo instructi tuto ad Circen euntis nihilque adversi passi" (In short: with this story [of Circe] Homer wanted to show people that sometimes cede to their desires and sometimes manage them with temperance and reason. At once, he wanted to present the sufferings and dangers of the former, whom he in his tale described as having been transformed into animals, and the security and unshaken peace of the other in the form of Ulysses, who, instructed by God with wit and temperance, arrives safely to Circe without coming to any harm).

[87] Pade 2018.

traditional Galenic medicine were eager to solve the mysteries of Homer's poetry. In the late seventeenth century iatrophilologists constructed elaborate strategies of reading Homer's *realia*, tending towards not only holistic physical but also moral and allegorical interpretations. In the early eighteenth century, iatrophilological questions appear to be deeply intertwined with other influential modes of interpretation originating in physicotheology, as shown by the cases of Adam Brendel, Georg Wolfgang Wedel and Daniel Wilhelm Triller. Finally, a considerable number of early modern scholars were convinced of Hippocrates having read Homer, of Hesiod having been well versed in medicine, and of poets having arrived at their wisdom through study, not having been born with it.[88]

This short survey, which has highlighted some parts of the interpretative tradition of Homer's *moly* in the Renaissance and the early modern period, has shown, as we hope, that Homeric poetry continued to fascinate and provide challenges to interpreters. Even today the "curse-breaker" *moly* continues to inspire writers.[89] The analysis of such debates makes it possible to trace important developments within early modern scholarship that are linked to the underlying methods of interpretation. Cases like these show the importance for modern research of evaluating early modern intellectual thought in its own right, appreciating the impressive learning of the predecessors of modern historical and philological research.

[88] Cf. the *colophon* in Triller 1716, 36: "Poëtae fiunt non nascuntur" (You become a poet, you are not born one).

[89] See e.g. Miller 2018, 87, Circe discovering *moly* at the beginning of her exile on Aiaia: "And there it was hidden in the leaf mould, beneath the ferns and mushrooms: a flower small as a fingernail, white as milk. The blood of that giant which my father had spilled in the sky. I plucked a stem out of the tangle. The roots clung hard a moment before yielding. They were black and thick, and smelled of metal and salt. The flower had no name that I knew so I called it moly, *root*, from the antique language of the gods. Oh, father, did you know the gift you gave me? For that flower, so delicate it could dissolve beneath your stepping foot, carried within it the unyielding power of *apotrope*, the turning aside of evil. Curse-breaker. Ward and bulwark against ruin, worshipped like a god, for it was pure. The only thing in all the world you could be certain would not turn against you."

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