

THE PRAGMATICS OF HOMERIC *KERTOMIA*

The poet's sole weapon against his low status and for the necessity of earning his living by obsequious flattery is a form of artistic revenge that allows him both indirectly to praise and insult his patron... The audience knows full well that this occurs. The poet's patrons...conduct social exchanges among themselves in the same manner. So too when dealing with superiors..., they characteristically employ the indirect, evasive, or innocuous statement that verges, and is recognised as so verging, on the insulting.¹

A lively debate has arisen over the meaning of *kertomia*, a kind of insulting speech, in Homer. Here I engage in the debate to offer a new solution to the problem, and to contribute to the study of Homeric epic from the perspective of socio-linguistics. The formalised Homeric dialect tends to be seen as a 'flattening' device that denied space and time in the interests of creating a timeless, pan-Hellenic poetic atmosphere. Some scholars are now qualifying this view, suggesting that Homer's poetic register borrowed or relied on patterns of everyday interaction and speech.² Following their lead, I will suggest that *kertomia*, as a description of characters' speech, evoked a genre of speech with its own institutional and social setting in the culture of Homer's audience.³

I will suggest that speech characterised as *kertomia* evoked a genre of everyday speech associated with young men and the élite social gatherings known as symposia.⁴ Speakers of *kertomia* tended to address a target primarily in relation to an unaddressed recipient. They calibrated their message in order to transmit it to one more than the other, or to the one in relation to the other. Frequently *kertomia* was transmitted by means of a figure. Often, though not always, it entailed a disparaging innuendo, or made an assertion of the speaker's status at the expense of the addressed or unaddressed recipient, or both. *Kertomia* was a genre of speech in which a speaker assumed an authoritative posture obliquely, expressed in a mixture of playfulness and aggression. The evocation of a genre of speech and a social situation familiar to the audience was useful for the poet, allowing him to add nuance and realism to depicted speech.

The problem of *kertomia* came to scholarly attention thanks to the word's prominence in a scene in *Iliad* 24. The dictionaries place *kertomia* in the semantic field

¹ S. Slyomovics, *The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hillali Oral Epic Poet in Performance* (Berkeley, 1987), 19.

² The pathbreaking work in this direction is R.P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the 'Iliad'* (Ithaca, 1989). More recent contributions include: E. Bakker, *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse* (Ithaca, 1997); E. Minchin, *Homer and the Resources of Memory: Some Applications of Cognitive Theory to the Iliad and the Odyssey* (Oxford, 2001); D. Beck, *Homeric Conversation* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2005).

³ For a hypothetical reconstruction of bard-audience interaction see R. Scodel, *Listening to Homer: Tradition, Narrative, and Audience* (Ann Arbor, 2002).

⁴ For the concept of 'speech genre' from a literary perspective see M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin, 1986), 60–102. For the concept from a social perspective see C. Briggs and R. Bauman, 'Genre, intertextuality, and social power', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2 (1992), 131–72; and also R. Bauman, 'Genre', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9 (1999), 84–7. A complete analysis of *kertomia* would require broadening the concepts of 'intertextuality' and 'genre' to accommodate socio-poetic intersections. This is beyond the scope of the present paper.

of ‘taunt’ or ‘jest’.⁵ This definition fits most classical occurrences adequately. But some readers have found it difficult to read the address which the word introduces in *Iliad* 24 as a taunt. The stakes are high because the scene is one of the most famous of Greek literature: Priam in the tent of Achilles. The question of the meaning of *kertomia* here impinges on the interpretation of the *Iliad*’s emotionally powerful conclusion. Scholars have thus taken the problem of *kertomia* as ancillary to explaining the exchange between Priam and Achilles.⁶ An inordinate focus on this one prominent instance has led them to downplay or even ignore other passages that can shed better light on *kertomia* as a characterisation of speech. Here my aim is to understand not the exchange of Priam and Achilles *per se*, but *kertomia* itself. I make the interpretation of Achilles’ *kertomia* ancillary to that objective.

Achilles’ *kertomia* unfolds as follows. Achilles and Priam have shared a meal, as is required by hospitality conventions, and then Priam tells Achilles to arrange his sleeping accommodations. The poet’s characterisation of Achilles’ response has surprised some readers:

τὸν δ’ ἐπικερτομέων προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς·
 ἐκτὸς μὲν δὴ λέξο, γέρον φίλε, μή τις Ἀχαιῶν
 ἐνθάδ’ ἐπέλθῃσιν βουληφόρος, οἳ τέ μοι αἰεὶ
 βουλὰς βουλευούσι παρήμενοι, ἧ θέμις ἐστί·
 τῶν εἴ τίς σε ἴδοιτο θοῇν διὰ νύκτα μέλαιναν,
 αὐτίκ’ ἂν ἐξείποι Ἀγαμέμνονι ποιμένι λαῶν,
 καὶ κεν ἀνάβλησις λύσιος νεκροῖο γένηται

(Il. 24. 650–5)

Swift-foot Achilles addressed him in *kertomia*, ‘Sleep outside, dear old man, lest an Achaean counsellor enters. They are always around me, planning plans – as they should. If someone saw you in the thick black night he would immediately tell Agamemnon, the shepherd of the people, and there would be delay in the release of the dead’.

Achilles’ words themselves seem gentle and considerate, in keeping with Book 24’s theme of reconciliation. It seems only natural for Achilles to show concern for an old man who reminds him of his father. Why are they characterised as *kertomia*? Are they a kind of mock or taunt? If yes, why does Achilles taunt his guest at this point? If not, what is *kertomia*?

Most of the scholars who have offered an explanation of *kertomia* have proceeded with the assumption that the dictionaries lacked an appropriately all-inclusive definition. They suggested semantic qualifications that would make literary sense of the interaction between Priam and Achilles. Because they have not considered all the evidence on *kertomia*, but only as it bears on Priam and Achilles, their interpretations have failed to capture the sense of *kertomia* in general. For example, Clarke: ‘talk of the sort that would be liable to make someone dismayed and uncertain how to react’;⁷ Hooker and Heubeck: ‘the provocation of another person into behaving in a certain way, whether that is the behaviour desired by the speaker...or not desired by him’;⁸

⁵ The 1996 *LSJ* supplement adds a nuance: ‘to mock by false statement, make game of’.

⁶ The prominence of this one *kertomia* in the minds of scholars is illustrated by their titles: J.T. Hooker, ‘A residual problem in *Iliad* 24’, *CQ* 36 (1986), 32–7; P.V. Jones, ‘*Iliad* 24.649: another solution’, *CQ* 39 (1989), 247–50; J.S. Clay, ‘*Iliad* 24.649 and the semantics of *kertomeo*’, *CQ* 49 (1999), 618–21; M. Lloyd, ‘The politeness of Achilles: off-record conversation strategies in Homer and the meaning of *Kertomia*’, *JHS* 124 (2004), 75–89.

⁷ M.C. Clarke, ‘“Heart-Cutting Talk”: Homeric *κερτομέω* and related words’, *CQ* 51 (2001), 329–38 at 336.

⁸ A. Heubeck, ‘Zwei homerische *peirai* (Il. 2.53ff.; Od. 24.250ff.)’, *Živa Antika* 31 (1981), 73–83; Hooker (n. 6), at 35.

Jones: 'to speak in such a way as to provoke (whether intentionally or not) a powerful emotional reaction';⁹ Clay: 'a subtle way of manipulating someone to do what you want them to do without explicitly saying so'.¹⁰

Of these scholars' attempts to define the word's semantics, Clay's insight that *kertomia* involves a kind of implicit misdirection or manipulation has been the most fruitful, though she was unable to extract from it a general account of *kertomia*. Her insight has recently been elaborated by Lloyd, who has shown that speeches classified as *kertomia* perform a subtle social operation based on their ambiguous meaning. Because Lloyd's is the most recent contribution, and because he follows in the wake of a recent linguistic turn in Homeric studies, I want to examine his assumptions and conclusions closely. I will explain why I agree with his general insight but disagree with the conclusions to which his linguistic perspective leads.

Lloyd's solution of *kertomia* is informed by the theory of 'conversational implicature', closely associated with the language philosopher Paul Grice. Grice's theory, I will show, deals only with conversation that is geared toward communicating intention. Jokes, sarcasm, irony, insults are linguistic phenomena of a different order, one which Grice's theory cannot accommodate. Because he relies on a particular model of communication implicit in Grice's theory, Lloyd misses some important aspects of *kertomia*.

Grice's theory of conversational implicature (in brief) holds that sometimes speakers *mean* something other than what they *say*, that to treat language as purely propositional is to misunderstand intention. He proposed that elliptical communication, the transmission of unexpressed meaning, was made possible by the operation of what he called the 'Cooperative Principle'. This Principle, along with at least four sub-principles, provides the baseline of all conversational exchanges, which he sees as tools for the communication of meaning. Deliberate deviation from the baseline is a method of conveying significance indirectly, or implicitly. For example, when a speaker deliberately does not adhere to the principle, 'Avoid obscurity', she intends the obscurity itself to be taken as a meaningful component of her utterance. A similar situation prevails when a speaker does not adhere to the sub-principles, 'Be relevant', 'Make your contribution as informative as is required', or 'Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence'.¹¹

Lloyd understands *kertomia* as a distinctive kind of sarcasm or irony that exploits Gricean implicature to assert superiority:

'Sarcasm' is the best English translation of *kertomia*, although missing its distinctive element of ironic politeness. *Kertomia* operates from a position of superiority, or at least temporary advantage, toying with the victim's inability to retaliate or even understand the taunt. The offence is off record, encoded in words or behaviour which are ostensibly less offensive or even polite.¹²

I agree with this explanation, in part. I agree that *kertomia* can be an assertion of superiority, but strongly disagree that the victim's inability to retaliate or understand the utterance's true meaning is at issue. Nor do I agree that *kertomia* describes a superficially polite speech (assuming Homeric politeness conventions resemble our own). Again, this might explain Achilles' *kertomia* but at the cost of failing to explain

⁹ Jones (n. 6), at 247.

¹⁰ Clay (n. 6), at 621.

¹¹ H.P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 26–7.

¹² Lloyd (n. 6), at 87.

other instances. Politeness, as we will see, can be found in some *kertomia*i only by a stretch of sense.

Lloyd suggests that Achilles tells Priam to sleep outside because he wants to convey implicitly that he has perceived the '*faux pas*' made by Priam when he asked Achilles to see to his accommodation. In this Priam overstepped the bounds of propriety, assuming too much of their new relationship. Achilles means to convey that he is aware that Priam has gone too far. He wants to imply that what has transpired in his tent in no way affects the war. '*Kertomia* is the *mot juste* for a sarcastic expression of superior knowledge expressed in words of ironic politeness'.¹³ But why does Achilles not say this outright? He cannot be afraid of retaliation from Priam – any more than Zeus is afraid of retaliation from Hera and Athena when he addresses them in *kertomia* (*Il.* 4.7–23). Achilles, Lloyd seems to suggest, speaks *kertomia* for the sheer fun of speaking *kertomia*. Yet Priam, peculiarly, is unaware of Achilles' intent: 'Priam grasps little or nothing of his meaning'.¹⁴

Lloyd's interpretation of *kertomia* is grounded in a linguistic model, itself implicit in Grice's theory of implicature, that presents speech as an exchange between fundamentally two entities, Speaker and Hearer. According to the model, Speaker manufactures an intention in her head and tries to express it to Hearer, who then decodes it in her head. Meaning is thus conveyed, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Obviously relevant to the exchange between Priam and Achilles, this model is less helpful if we want to understand *kertomia* more generally. For, as Erving Goffman has pointed out, often speech is directed only tangentially to its addressee. If we do not keep in mind that there may be an unaddressed addressee, who is as much a part of the exchange as the speaker and the addressed addressee, we are likely to miss an important piece of the picture.¹⁵

Furthermore, we cannot take for granted that the ancient Greeks in general, and Homer's audience in particular, had the same notions about communication and conversation as we do. Lloyd makes the bold assumption that he is in a position to decide in a Homeric conversational exchange what information is relevant and what is irrelevant, and to deduce based on that assumption when an implicit meaning is being conveyed, and what that meaning is. Indeed, Grice himself acknowledged that his theory of implicature was hard-pressed to account for the actual extent of relevance: 'Though the [relevance] maxim itself is terse, its formulation conceals a number of problems that exercise me a good deal: questions about what different kinds and focusses of relevance there may be, how these shift in the course of a talk exchange..., and so on'.¹⁶ It is not surprising that these questions troubled Grice. As a philosopher of language, his goal was to describe language abstracted from its socio-cultural contexts. Yet it may be impossible to account for what sorts of relevance expectations there may be in a conversation without looking to the context. Grice was unwilling to look to the context because he was committed to the notion of a single, cross-cultural and universal, standard of cooperation.

Tellingly, when Grice returned to the problem of conversational relevance shortly before his death, he had retreated from his original assertion of a single cooperative standard. He suggested, 'it is the *rationality or irrationality* of conversational conduct which I have been concerned to track down rather than any more general characteri-

¹³ Lloyd (n. 6), at 89.

¹⁴ Lloyd (n. 6), at 89.

¹⁵ E. Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia, 1981), 129–37.

¹⁶ Grice (n. 11), at 27.

sation of conversational adequacy'.¹⁷ According to him, he had been interested solely in 'rational' conversations, not those which 'coexist with a high degree of reserve, hostility, and chicanery'.¹⁸ What Grice's retreat means for us, is that if *kertomia* is a kind of 'irrational', *uncooperative* conversation, if, as I will make clear, it is a language of boasting and insulting and not of communicating intention, it is inherently problematic to use Grice's conversation theory to approach it. The later Grice himself sought to limit the applicability of his Cooperative Principle to 'rational' conversation, that is, to conversation geared toward communicating intention.

It is far from evident that speakers of *kertomia* in particular intend (so to speak) to communicate intention. *Kertomia*, rather, can be better understood if we view it as a kind of performance involving the assumption of a certain posture relative to the social context, and delivered in a certain tone and to a certain effect. What kind of performance *kertomia* entailed will become clearer if, before returning to Achilles' *kertomia*, we consider another case of *kertomia* which scholars have found equally problematic, the exchange between Odysseus and the Phaeacian prince Laodamas in the *Odyssey*. I will explore the dynamics of this exchange further with reference to two other texts, before returning to the *kertomia* of Achilles.

The scene is the following. The assembled Phaeacians have just finished a pleasant meal, and the young men turn to sport. Laodamas then addresses the (still) unknown guest:

δεῦρ' ἄγε καὶ σύ, ξεῖνε πάτερ, πείρησαι ἀέθλων,
εἰ τινά που δεδάηκας· εἴοικε δέ σ' ἴδμεν ἀέθλους.
οὐ μὲν γὰρ μείζον κλέος ἀνέρος, ὅφρα κεν ῆσιν,
ἢ ὅ τι ποσσὶν τε ῥέξῃ καὶ χερσὶν ἔῃσιν.
ἀλλ' ἄγε πείρησαι, σκέδασον δ' ἀπὸ κήδεα θυμοῦ·
σοὶ δ' ὁδὸς οὐκέτι δηρὸν ἀπέσσεται, ἀλλὰ τοι ἤδη
νηὺς τε κατείρυσται καὶ ἐπαρτέες εἰσὶν ἑταῖροι.
τόν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς·
Λαοδάμα, τί με ταῦτα κελεύετε κερτομέοντες; (Od. 8.145–53)

'You too, father stranger, come on, try your hand at the sports, if you know any. You seem to know sport. There is no greater glory for a man, while he lives, than what he accomplishes with his arms and legs. Come on, try, shed the sorrow from your heart. The return trip is no longer far off. Already a ship has been drawn down and the noble companions are ready'. Crafty Odysseus then addressed him and said, 'Laodamas, why do you say this to me in *kertomia*?'

The exchange between Odysseus and Laodamas resembles that between Priam and Achilles in its superficial solicitude. Achilles referred to the accommodation of his guest but the real subject of his speech, as we will see shortly, was himself. Similarly, though Laodamas refers to Odysseus' state in superficially solicitous terms, the real subject is the difference between Odysseus, as one who 'seems' to know sports, and himself, as one who knows sports. The real issue, as I take it, is King Alcinous' high opinion of Odysseus, particularly as it was expressed when he voiced a desire to make Odysseus his son-in-law (7.311–5). This marked him as a clear threat to the other young men of Alcinous' court, especially his own son, Laodamas, whose seat at the feast Alcinous significantly gave Odysseus (7.169–70). The young men challenge Odysseus to live up to the estimation which Alcinous has declared, with actions, not just words, in which the stranger has already proved himself most skilled.

¹⁷ Grice (n. 11), 367, my emphasis.

¹⁸ Grice (n. 11), 369. Far from disproving the validity of his Cooperative Principle, he argued, these types of exchanges proved it inasmuch as they 'aped its applicability'.

But I suspect that the *kertomia* was only partly in Laodamas' address to Odysseus. We should also consider the address he made to his fellows just prior to addressing Odysseus:

δεύτε, φίλοι, τὸν ξείνον ἐρώμεθα, εἴ τιν' ἄεθλον
οἷδέ τε καὶ δεδάηκε· φύην γε μὲν οὐ κακὸς ἐστι,
μηρούς τε κνήμας τε καὶ ἄμφω χεῖρας ὕπερθεν
αὐχένα τε στιβαρόν μέγα τε σθένος· οὐδέ τι ἥβης
δεύεται, ἀλλὰ κακοῖσι συνέρρηγκται πολέεσσιν.
οὐ γὰρ ἐγὼ γέ τί φημι κακώτερον ἄλλο θαλάσσης
ἄνδρα γε συγχεῖναι, εἰ καὶ μάλα καρτερὸς εἴη (Od. 8.133–9)

Come, friends, let us ask the stranger if he knows any sport. He is not bad, as far as build: his thighs and calves, and up top his hands and sturdy neck. He is strong. He does not lack youth, only he has been shrivelled up by his many troubles. What I think is that there is nothing worse than the sea to do in a man, even if he is very mighty.

If Odysseus overheard this, he would have certainly been a fool not to realise that he was being insulted. For no sooner does Laodamas praise Odysseus' build and youth than he contradicts himself by commenting that he has been 'shrivelled up' by the sea.¹⁹ This serves to reverse the polarity of his words, from a sympathetic assertion of the stranger's 'sorry' state into an antagonistic ascription of the stranger's sorry status, while simultaneously drawing a distinction between the young men who have already proven their skill in sports and the old man who is suspiciously persuasive (like a merchant, as Euryalus will bluntly say).

This is *kertomia* at its purest. It is performed by young men making status-assertions obliquely, it differentiates between the addressee and the target, it draws a figure, and it takes place during a feast. These are precisely the pragmatic characteristics of *kertomia* which two other early texts seem to suggest. The first text is from the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. Baby Hermes has just made a lyre out of a turtle. And then:

...θεὸς δ' ὑπὸ καλὸν ᾄειδεν
ἐξ αὐτοσχέδιος πευρώμενος, ἥ ὅτε κούροι
ἤβηται θαλίῃσι παραιβόλα κερτομέουσιν,
ἄμφι Δία Κρονίδην καὶ Μαιάδα καλλιπείδιλον,
ἥως πάρος ὠρίζεσκον ἔταιρείῃ φιλότῃτι,
ἦν τ' αὐτοῦ γενεὴν ὀνομακλυτὸν ἐξονομάζων·
ἄμφιπόλους τε γέραιρε καὶ ἀγλαὰ δώματα νύμφης
καὶ τρίποδας κατὰ οἶκον ἐπηετανούς τε λέβητας.
καὶ τὰ μὲν οὖν ᾄειδε, τὰ δὲ φρεσὶν ἄλλα μενοίνα. (54-62)

The god started up a song, proceeding in improvisation, just like young men at feasts level asides in *kertomia*: about Zeus the son of Cronus and fair-slippered Maia, how they associated in loving companionship. He recounted his own famous birth, honoured the handmaids and the glorious palace of the nymph, and the tripods through the house and the numerous cauldrons. Some things he sang, but he had other things in mind.

This text supplies us with the important information that *kertomia* is characteristic of young men, the context of feasts, and features *paraibola*, 'side-shots' or better,

¹⁹ The word I translate 'shrivel up' is an hapax, so it is difficult to know exactly what Laodamas means by it. Whatever he means, it is difficult not to take it as a contradiction of the praise by the syntax: 'he does not lack youth, only that he has been x-ed by the sea'. Whatever the sea has done to him, it is in opposition to his build, which Laodamas has ironically described as impressive.

‘asides’ (cf. *Il.* 4.6). The song which Hermes improvises is interesting, precisely because it does not seem to be mockery, sarcasm, irony, condescension or insult, by any stretch of sense. The *Hymn to Hermes* recounts the infant god’s attempts to increase his status. Baby Hermes is eager to prove himself a great god. He does not wait for a poet to perform a hymn for him, he does it himself. The poet compares Hermes’ song to an aside that young men sing in feasts, I suggest, because it is an assertion of personal status, and because it is indirect. We might also add: because it is a lie. Maia lives in a cave, not in a palace.²⁰ But a hymn that depicts Maia’s wealth and narrates her relationship with Zeus also asserts Hermes’ own heritage and patrimony. This is the essence of *kertomia*, to assert status while appearing to state something else. As the poet says, ‘Some things he sang, but he had other things in mind’.²¹

The second relevant passage comes from Hesiod’s *Works and Days*. On the sixth day of the month, the poet says, it is not good to be born a girl. A boy, yes: but that boy ‘will love speaking *kertoma*, will love lies, crafty words, and secretive chitchats’ (788–9). This passage sheds light on why Odysseus called Laodamas’ invitation *kertomia*, and why he subsequently responded so forcefully. Note that Laodamas invites Odysseus to play only *after* he has discussed his intention with, and commented on Odysseus’ appearance to, his friends. Also note that Odysseus responds in the second person plural, ‘why are you (pl.) addressing me in *kertomia*?’ Laodamas’ speech to his fellows is just the kind of ‘secretive chitchat’ that the sixth-day’s boy is fond of.

Laodamas’ speech operates on two levels: to its addressed recipient, Odysseus, it is a superficially considerate invitation, but to its unaddressed recipients, his fellows, it is an insult targeted at Odysseus that simultaneously asserts his own superiority. Odysseus, master of double-speak that he is, quickly perceives the *kertomia*, and appropriately erupts. His eruption is not uncalculated. Once he has thrown the discus with such violence to make the Phaeacians cower (8.190–1), he challenges the young men to reach the mark in language that echoes and responds to Laodamas’ invitation more than to Euryalus’ much blunter insult (159–64). He calls out to the young men, ‘Come on, let someone try his hand...in boxing, wrestling or running’, *δεῦρ’ ἄγε πειρηθήτω, ...ἣ πύξ ἡ ἐπ’ ἀλγῇ ἢ καὶ ποσσίν* (205–6, cf. 145, 148). Laodamas is the local boxing champion (130). That boxing is the first sport Odysseus names thus carries a clearly aimed challenge. But, he quickly qualifies it. He will face any challenger – except Laodamas, since he is his ‘guest-friend, and who would fight with a friend’ (208)? The brief interval between challenge and qualification, we can assume, was enough to teach Laodamas a lesson.

Kertomia was thus a kind of linguistic performance, closely associated with young men and feasts, that asserted status indirectly. With this in mind, rather than looking for the intention Achilles’ words mean to communicate, let us look at what his words do in their context to orient his relationship with Priam. Let us first look at what occasions Achilles’ *kertomia*. When Achilles speaks to Priam in *kertomia* he is responding to Priam’s imperative to arrange for his accommodation:

²⁰ J. S. Clay, *The Politics of Olympus: Form and Meaning in the Major Homeric Hymns* (Princeton, 1989), 108–11.

²¹ This verse is normally taken to refer to Hermes’ transitioning desire from self-hymning to cattle-rustling. But the *alla men...alla de* construction can also be taken to refer to Hermes’ *kertomia*. Compare the similar thought and construction in Athena’s encouragement to Telemachus before his debut in heroic society (*Od.* 3.26–8).

λέξον νῦν με τάχιστα, διοτρεφές, ὄφρα καὶ ἥδη
 ὕπνω ὑπο γλυκερῷ ταρπώμεθα κοιμηθέντες·
 οὐ γάρ πω μύσαν ὅσσε ὑπὸ βλεφάροισιν ἐμοῖσιν
 ἐξ οὗ σῆς ὑπὸ χερσὶν ἔμδος πάϊς ὤλεσε θυμόν,
 ἀλλ' αἰεὶ στενάχω καὶ κήδεα μυρία πέσσω,
 αὐλῆς ἐν χόρτοισι κυλινδόμενος κατὰ κόπρον.
 νῦν δὲ καὶ σίτου πασάμην καὶ αἶθοπα οἶνον
 λαυκανίης καθέηκα· πάρος γε μὲν οὐ τι πεπάσμεν. (Il. 24.635–42)

Put me to bed as soon as possible, god-born, so that we can enjoy sleep. My eyes have not closed since my son lost his life at your hands. I was continually lamenting my woes, rolling in the dung in my courtyard. But now I have had some bread and wetted my throat with wine. Before I had not had anything at all.

Lloyd takes this as a breach of decorum. In a way it is, but not as he explains it. He suggests that Priam, as a suppliant, should wait for his host to tell him to retire. Had he been a guest, it would have been more acceptable for him to take the initiative (cf. *Od.* 4.294–5). I do not think that the Homeric text justifies our extrapolating such a strict code of courtly etiquette. Moreover, suppliants and guests, as Gould has shown, were not mutually exclusive categories.²²

The crucial thing, I would suggest, is not that Priam took the initiative in calling it a night, but that he took the initiative *at all*. Compare what happens when Arete is too forward in taking the initiative and commanding the assembled Phaeacian noblemen to see to 'her' guest's honourable departure (*Od.* 11.340). The court elder Echeneus immediately intervenes and redirects the initiative to the authority of the king, Alcinoos, who asserts his power over the matter unequivocally: 'Departure will be a concern for the men, and most of all for me. For I have the authority [*kratos*] among the people' (352–3). Telemachus makes a similar assertion when his mother becomes too forward in commanding the suitors to include the beggar in the contest of the bow: 'The bow will be a concern for men, and most of all for me. For I have the authority in this house' (21.352–3). What compelled these males to assert their authority so bluntly was perhaps the fact that in each case the challenge came from a woman. Priam is no woman, but Achilles still must assert his authority when faced with Priam's assertion of his.

We can get a better sense of the illocutionary force of Achilles' *kertomia* by further comparing it with the speech he addressed to Priam directly before they shared a meal. At that point, Priam gave another similarly voiced command to Achilles, when he offered him a seat:

μή πώ μ' ἐς θρόνον ἵζε, διοτρεφές, ὄφρα κεν Ἑκτωρ
 κεῖται ἐνὶ κλισίῃσιν ἀκηδής, ἀλλὰ τάχιστα
 λύσον ἔν' ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἴδω· σὺ δὲ δέξαι ἄποινα
 πολλά, τά τοι φέρομεν· (Il. 24.553–6)

Do not put me on a chair, god-born, while Hector lies in the dust uncared-for. Release him as soon as possible, so that I see him with my eyes. Accept the large ransom that we bring.

This command caused the angry Achilles to resurface. Rather than *kertomia*, the poet describes this response as a more menacing dark look (*hypodra idôn*): 'Do not annoy me, old man. I have it in mind to release Hector. A messenger came from Zeus: my mother who bore me, the daughter of the Old Man of the Sea. And I know you,

²² J. Gould, 'Hiketeia', *JHS* 93 (1973), 74–103 at 90–4.

Priam, in my heart, you do not fool me. A god led you to the swift ships of the Achaeans' (24.559–64).

Achilles' speech of *kertomia* is closely related to this speech. Both deal with the orientation of his relationship with Priam. They differ in attitude and tone; one makes a status assertion directly, and the other indirectly. In the *hypodra idôn* speech, Achilles confronts Priam's command directly as one based in his bravery at infiltrating the Greek camp. By saying that he knows that Priam only managed to reach him with the help of the gods, Achilles directs the responsibility of his presence to the gods, and hence away from Priam. If Achilles, therefore, does what Priam has just commanded, which he will, it is not because Priam commands it.

In the *kertomia* speech, Achilles also obeys Priam's command. Note that he addresses Priam only after he has already ordered his servants to make the appropriate arrangements. As Lloyd points out, it goes without saying that Priam will not sleep in the main chamber with Achilles.²³ Guests generally sleep in the anteroom (cf. *Od.* 3.399, 4.297, 7.345). Lloyd rightly argues that the explanation Achilles offers for the obvious is completely beside the point. But his characterisation of Priam's commands as a *faux pas* or gaffe suggests that he has missed the point. Priam is accustomed to speaking authoritatively. His commands to Achilles, to release his son and to be shown to bed, will be obeyed, that is, they will carry authority. Achilles will validate the authority by doing exactly what Priam commands. His *kertomia* is an indirect way to assert his own authority even while yielding to Priam's.

The crucial thing in his speech, I suggest, is the figure it draws. Achilles says that he is concerned for Priam's safety, even at night, because the Achaean leaders are always around his tent, and one of these might inform Agamemnon of Priam's presence in the camp. There is a fundamental contradiction here, which Lloyd observes. If Achilles is as important as the figure implies, he should certainly be able to dissuade Agamemnon from harassing Priam. Moreover, as far as we know, Achilles' tent is not a central point in the Greek military administration. The only time we saw other 'big men' in Achilles' tent was when they came to induce him to return to the fight. The figure has a different force: not to communicate an intention but to depict Achilles as the kind of big man on whom the Greek army relies for its strategy. It asserts his authority even as he yields to Priam. People are always around him, he says, 'planning plans – as is right'. If one of these should see Priam there and tell Agamemnon, there might be trouble, 'a delay in the return of the deceased'. This speech (which includes a Homeric approximation of bureaucratese) allows Achilles simultaneously to claim authority while disclaiming responsibility for the claim. But it is not *kertomia* only because it is indirect.²⁴ It is marked as *kertomia* because the poet is inviting the audience to hear in Achilles' words the playful yet aggressive sympotic voices of young men.²⁵

²³ Lloyd (n. 6), at 76–8.

²⁴ Achilles himself attests, perhaps somewhat hypocritically, that Homeric characters can be less than forthcoming with their intentions: 'Hateful to me like the gates of Hades is the man who hides one thing in his heart but says another' (*Il.* 9.312–13; but cf. *Od.* 3.26–8).

²⁵ On the seriousness of sympotic play, see D. Collins, *Master of the Game: Competition and Performance in Greek Poetry* (Washington, 2004), 63–83. I do not address directly the question of what might be the poetic gain in having Achilles speak in *kertomia*. Here I am less concerned with Achilles' psychology. I only note that returning the angry young man to a more normal state of youthful assertion would be in keeping with accepted interpretations that see Achilles' return to society as an important movement of the *Iliad's* conclusion.

To grasp the sense of *kertomia*, thus, it is necessary to go beyond the model of linguistic communication assumed by Grice's theory of implicature, and its emphasis on the speaker's intention or meaning and the addressee's understanding of that meaning, or lack thereof. The category of *kertomia* did not hinge on an assessment of the speaker's intention, but on the tone of his linguistic performance. Performatively, *kertomia* served to orient social relationships by means of aggressive, if oblique, ascriptions of status and authority.

By recognising this oblique force of *kertomia*, furthermore, we can understand two additional Homeric passages that have troubled scholarly attempts to define the term's semantics. One *kertomia* cannot be understood by its addressee, showing that the addressee's understanding is not the main focus; and the other is not even speech, showing that the crucial element was not meaning but force.

The following *kertomia* cannot be understood by its addressee:

τὸν δ' ἐπικερτομέων προσέφησ' Πατρόκλεες ἱππεύ·
 “ὦ πόποι ἦ μάλ' ἐλαφρὸς ἀνὴρ, ὥς ρεῖα κυβιστᾶ.
 εἰ δὴ πού καὶ πόντῳ ἐν ἰχθυόεντι γένοιτο,
 πολλοὺς ἂν κορέσειεν ἀνὴρ ὅδε τήθεα διφῶν
 νηὸς ἀποθρώσκων, εἰ καὶ δυσπήμελος εἴη,
 ὥς νῦν ἐν πεδίῳ ἔξ ἵππων ρεῖα κυβιστᾶ.
 ἦ ῥα καὶ ἐν Τρώεσσι κυβιστητήρες ἔασιν.” (Il. 16.744–50)

And then, knight Patroclus, you addressed him in *kertomia*: ‘What a light man! How easily he dives! If he was in the fishy sea he would feed many, this man, in the depths jumping off a ship, even in stormy weather. So easily he dives off his horses in the field. Of course: there are divers among the Trojans!’

It is unclear from Lloyd's account what Patroclus means to convey by addressing in *kertomia* a man he has just killed. He notes, ‘The effect of *kertomia*... derives from the contrast between the utterance's comparatively inoffensive ostensible meaning and its menacing off-record significance’.²⁶ First, Patroclus' words seem neither polite nor inoffensive. Second, Patroclus' sense of superiority cannot derive from his victim's ignorance of the true significance of the address. Third, there is little point in menacing a man one has just killed. My explanation of *kertomia*, as an address only tangentially addressed to its ostensible addressee, can account for Patroclus' address to the dead Cebriones. Cebriones is only a target. His comprehension, or lack thereof, is irrelevant. He merely provides Patroclus with the opportunity to convey a posture to his unaddressed addressees, the other Trojan warriors. Note how quick he is to redirect against the Trojans the figure of the diver, drawn at the dead Cebriones' expense.²⁷

This solution of *kertomia*, which distinguishes between addressee and target, might also account for perhaps the most puzzling instance of the word in Homer. In *Il.*

²⁶ Lloyd (n. 6), at 87.

²⁷ See H. Pelliccia, ‘The interpretation of *Iliad* 6.145–9 and the sympotic contribution to rhetoric’, *Colby Quarterly* 38 (2002), 197–230. Pelliccia suggests that the sympotic game of *eikasmos* made its way into epic interaction. In that game, each participant would draw an amusing figure at another's expense, or speak in general terms that were also a put-down. If *eikasmos* and *kertomia* both had sympotic resonances, it is not surprising that the one shades into the other. We should also not be surprised if *kertomia*, from another perspective, resembles the *ainos* of lyric, as a message, commonly delivered in symposia, that was meant to be decoded only by some while being obscure to others; on which see G. Nagy, *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore, 1990), 146–98.

16.259–65 the Myrmidons are compared to wasps that children, ‘always up to *kertomia*’, have angered:

αὐτίκα δὲ σφῆκεσσαν ἐοικότες ἐξεχέοντο
 εἰνοδίοις, οὓς παῖδες ἐριδμαίνωσιν ἔθοντες
 αἰεὶ κερτομέοντες ὁδῶ ἐπὶ οἰκί' ἔχοντας
 νηπίαχοι· ξυγὸν δὲ κακὸν πολέεσσι τιθεῖσι.
 τοὺς δ' εἴ περ παρά τίς τε κίων ἄνθρωπος ὁδίτης
 κινήσῃ ἀέκων, οἳ δ' ἄλκιμον ἦτορ ἔχοντες
 πρόσσω πᾶς πέτεται καὶ ἀμύνει οἷσι τέκεσσι.

And then they poured out like wasps by the roadside that children like to rile up, always up to *kertomia*, in their home by the road. Fools. They cause trouble for many. If a traveller on his way moves them accidentally each flies out with fury to protect its children.

This passage is the only instance of *kertomia* in Homer that does not involve speech. I would suggest that the boys can be said to be acting in *kertomia* metaphorically because they are harassing the wasps (by throwing stones?) but are really aiming at the witless passers-by, who will be stung by the overexcited wasps. This behaviour is called *kertomia* because it is indirect: it is ‘targeted’ to the wasps but ‘addressed’ to the travellers. It is also *kertomia* because it displays an arrogance characteristic of young males.

To sum up, some pragmatic features of *kertomia* were the following:

- 1 *It was indirect.* As a speech act it was often directed at another person or persons beside, and in reference to, its recipient – it had a target as well as an addressee. Laodamas’ invitation, I suggested, was *targeted* to Odysseus but *addressed* to Laodamas’ fellows.²⁸ Similarly, Patroclus’ comparison of Cebriones to a diver is intended for the Trojans. The boys throw stones at the wasps but are really aiming at the travellers.
- 2 *It was characteristic of young men and feasts.* I infer this from the passage I cited from the *Hymn to Hermes*. Interestingly, *kertomia* is frequently shown toward seniors: Achilles to Priam, Laodamas to Odysseus, Odysseus to Laertes (24.240–55). This is not to say that women or older people cannot engage in it; they can and do. But when they do they are engaging in a genre of speech *marked* as masculine and youthful.
- 3 *It involved the ascription of status, both self’s and other’s.* Achilles indirectly asserts authority even as he yields to Priam’s. Laodamas indirectly asserts his own youth and physical prowess, in contrast to Odysseus’ advanced years and sorry shape. Hermes boasts of his mother’s wealth and relationship with Zeus in order to stress his own, as yet unattained, importance.
- 4 *It could be playful.* That is why between intimates, such as Athena and Odysseus (*Od.* 13.326), or Odysseus and Laertes, it is a form of affection, but between non-intimates it is a sign of aggression and hostility. Achilles’ *kertomia* to Priam, I think, is *both* aggressive and affectionate.

Methodologically, I tried to suggest that we should be cautious in how we use linguistic theories. I argued that Lloyd’s reliance on Grice’s theory of conversation led

²⁸ Good examples of this are *Il.* 4.7–23, Zeus speaks to the assembled gods about Hera and Athena as if they were not present; *Od.* 18.353, Eurymachus addresses the suitors about the present ‘Aethon’.

him to assume a particular model of meaning and communication, which, I argued, is problematic when applied to Homeric *kertomia*. Our own linguistic focus on meaning or intention as a representation of psychological reality (which is often reinscribed by juridical categories of agency and responsibility)²⁹ might be misapplied to Homer. Adkins argued some years ago that Homer's people seem to have very different notions of motivation, interaction and the assignment of responsibility.³⁰ We should therefore be careful of assuming what Homer's heroes 'mean' by what they say, particularly when our lexical semantic definitions render their meanings ambiguous. As Wittgenstein pointed out, 'An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions'.³¹ The original audience's ethnopragmatic sense might have coloured their interpretations of the heroes' meanings in particular ways that may not be easily accessible to us. I argued here that the poet's characterisation of some speech acts as *kertomia* would have evoked for the audience the accents of young men's speech and the tones associated with the social institution of the symposia, where language had targets as well as addressees, and figures were often drawn at someone's expense. The 'oblique' (*paraibola*) talk of *kertomia* was a natural extension of the symposium's 'crooked songs' (*skolia*).³²

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²⁹ See M. Rosaldo, 'The things we do with words: Llongot speech acts and the speech act theory in philosophy', *Language in Society* 11 (1982), 203–37. More generally, see the essays in J.H. Hill and J.T. Irvine (edd.), *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse* (Cambridge and New York, 1993).

³⁰ A. Adkins, 'Threatening, abusing and feeling angry in the Homeric poems', *JHS* 89 (1969), 7–21.

³¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1953), 108, §337.

³² Cf. G. Lambin, *La chanson grecque dans l'Antiquité* (Paris, 1992), 266–307; V. Liapis, 'Double entendres in *skolia*: the etymology of *skolion*', *Eranos* 94 (1996), 111–22; Collins (n. 25), 84–134.

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