

# *Telling Lies and Inventing Rhetoric In Ancient Greece*

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**F**rom the advisors of Mayan kings to storytellers among Siberian tribes, people who are skilled with language have been valued in every society on earth, but only one society has invented methods for both analyzing and teaching skilled speech. According to what we know, which hardly rises above the level of legend, the study of rhetoric arose among the Greeks sometime in the fifth century BCE. This supposedly happened first with a man named Corax and his student Tisias on the island of Sicily, which at that time was part of the Greek world, after several centuries of colonization around the Mediterranean.

The early Greeks understood what all people know, that language is power. A man can sit on a throne and just by speaking set an army in motion. Because they understood this, the Greeks embraced the study of rhetoric. But why did the study of rhetoric—of learning to be skilled with words—originate in this time and place? What was it about ancient Greek culture that allowed them to create such study? Part of the intellectual foundation for such a discovery lies in something possibly unique in Greek culture. They admired liars, at least at a symbolic level. Rhetoric is not actually about lying, though plenty of people don't seem to know that. Rhetoric is, however, about manipulating language, which may manipulate other people, and while we all do this instinctively, a very rigid moral code will surely exist uneasily with conscious manipulation. In daily life an ancient Greek probably hated a liar as much as we do, yet in their religion as well as among some of their cultural heroes, there were many instances of lying that were not only tolerated, but celebrated as quite clever. If your moral code is able to make cultural heroes of liars, then intellectually a foundation is laid for discovering more effective ways to manipulate language, and thus the study of rhetoric.

I intend to illustrate aspects of ancient Greek culture as fodder for the birth of rhetoric by contrasting them with another culture which is known to have influenced the Greeks—ancient Egypt. In particular, I will contrast the religious beliefs of both cultures and compare evidence from their literature.

## EGYPTIAN RELIGION, MORALITY, AND JUDGEMENT

The religion of ancient Egypt was far more complicated than a casual acquaintance would suggest, covering a wide geographic region, and stretching over about 3,000 years. The religion changed in various ways through the course of time, but a consistent factor throughout Egyptian history is an emphasis on morality and truth. That emphasis was supported by a widespread belief in judgment after death, which eventually was codified as a metaphor that came to be believed as a theological reality, with a ceremony in which the heart of the deceased was weighed, as in the image below.



(The weighing of the heart. Source: Image Database for Biblical Studies, Yale Divinity School, used by permission)

There are many visual representations of the weighing of the heart ceremony. In this image, the actual weighing—on a scale just to the right of center—occupies only a small part

of the overall picture, putting the weighing into a broader religious context. Seated on a throne to the left is the chief god of the dead, Osiris, with his sisters, Isis and Nephthys. In Egyptian belief, Osiris had died and come back to life, and thus he symbolized the idea that Egyptians could also live after death. On the left weighing pan of the scale is the heart of the person who has died and is being judged, and in the pan to the right is a feather, representing the goddess Maat, symbol of justice. The goddess is also shown here in the strange-looking figure to the far right, where she has a feather, her symbol, in place of a head. Standing beneath the scale is the god of embalming, Anubis, on the right (with a jackal head). Just to the left of the scale stands the god of writing, Thoth (with an ibis head, a type of bird with a long beak), who is responsible for record keeping. Notice that a written record has even become a part of this religious belief from several thousand years ago. Beside Thoth, sitting on a pedestal in the very center of the image is perhaps the most important figure in the scene, from the point of view of an anxious Egyptian. If the heart of the deceased was too heavy, an indication of sins committed in life, the lion/crocodile creature would devour the soul of the person being judged, who would cease to exist, instead of going on to the next life. The ceremony of weighing the heart was believed by many Egyptians to be what would happen after death, and thus a judgment hung over every head for actions committed while alive.

## EGYPTIAN LITERATURE AND TRUTH

A belief in a day of judgment for moral behavior, if people really do believe it, would seem likely to scare them into acting a little better some of the time. When we look at Egyptian literature we can see evidence that morality was emphasized in writing, sometimes in the form of advising moral behavior, sometimes in the form of bragging about one's own goodness, and sometimes in the form of bemoaning the wickedness of others.

In particular, the injunction to tell the truth stands in great contrast to Greek practice. From early in recorded Egyptian history (the period known as the Old Kingdom), on into later periods (the Middle Kingdom), and up until the empire period in their history (the New Kingdom), we can find admonitions to speak the truth and behave morally. From the New Kingdom comes the Book of the Dead, describing how to behave in the afterlife. One type of information given in the book is what to say in the afterlife, and in the lines below we see some of the claims the deceased should make when addressing Osiris (pictured on the throne in the image above). In this version of advice from the Book of the Dead, the deceased is advised to say, "I have brought Maat to you; I have expelled deceit for you," emphasizing the

truth of what is said, followed by a list containing declarations of general goodness. The list here is excerpted from a longer list, to include only the statements directly involving language:

I have not advanced my name for exaltation to honors.  
I have not blasphemed a god.  
I have not defamed a slave to his superior.  
I have not ordered any murder.

The list ends with the repeated refrain: “I am pure! I am pure! I am pure! I am pure.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the genres of writing found in ancient Egypt is the Instructions, in which someone presumably older and wiser gives a list of admonitions for someone younger. R.B. Parkinson summarized the rule of truth in Egyptian culture, as expressed in the Instructions (or Teachings) genre: “In the Teachings there are frequent injunctions to ‘do’ or ‘say’ Truth in public and private contexts.”<sup>2</sup> We find evidence of the importance of truth from the Old Kingdom tomb inscription of Nefer-Seshem-Re, which reads “I spoke truly, I did right.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly the “Autobiography of Harkhuf” credits Harkhuf with the line “I was one who spoke fairly.”<sup>4</sup>

The injunction to truth is given in both positive and negative forms in the “Instruction of Ptahhotep,” which advises “If you are a magistrate of standing,/ Commissioned to satisfy the many,/ Hew a straight line./ When you speak don’t lean to one side,/ Beware lest one complain.”<sup>5</sup> In a negative form the “Instruction” says “[The fool] lives on that by which one dies,/ His food is distortion of speech.”<sup>6</sup> This reference to death is possibly a reference to the judgment of the dead, in which immoral behavior can lead to destruction of the soul. The idea of the importance of telling the truth continues in the “Instruction Addressed to King Merikare,” which says “Speak truth in your house.”<sup>7</sup>

Later on in the Middle Kingdom, the rule of truth is also commonly found. A boundary stele (a stone column) of King Sesostri III declares “As my father lives for me, I speak the truth!”<sup>8</sup> In the social chaos literary genre, the “Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb” moans that “Right-speaking is abandoned.”<sup>9</sup> A similar complaint is made in “The Eloquent Peasant” when the peasant himself criticizes an official who is ignoring his pleas for help. In doing so the peasant gives advice on speaking properly: “You do not repay my good speech which comes from the mouth of Re himself! / Speak justice, do justice, / For it is mighty.”<sup>10</sup> From the instances cited here, we can see that over a long period of time, and various genres, Egyptian writing emphasized truth telling as a cultural ideal.

## GREEK RELIGION: AFTERLIFE AND LYING GODS

Whether the afterlife in ancient Greece was considered good or bad, there was very little or no moral judgment for how life was lived. In contrast to Egyptian religion, the Greeks did not have a strong sense of judgment after death. That lack of belief in judgment may not have caused a more casual attitude about moral behavior, but for the purpose here, what caused Greek attitudes toward truth telling is not the point. Instead, I am trying to show that religious beliefs did not *impede* these cultural attitudes. We know that the Greeks revered cultural figures, both gods and humans, who engaged in lying and were sometimes even admired specifically for that. For the sake of this discussion, we do not need to know just how such cultural figures arose. It is enough to propose that such an attitude was *able* to exist because there was no strong impulse to tell the truth out of fear of punishment in the afterlife.

As with the discussion of Egyptian religion above, we can use examples from Greek writing to illustrate cultural attitudes. The main source that I am using is Homer, specifically the *Odyssey*, though with a couple of citations from other writings. Since the Greek gods themselves were known to tell lies, I will begin with examples that illustrate holy mendacity.

The most prominent example of lying by a god in the *Odyssey* is the remarkably glib-tongued Athena. As a goddess, she is able to do more than merely lie, since she can also appear in disguise and pretend to be someone else. In her first appearance to Odysseus's son Telemakhos: "Flashing down from Olympos' height she went/ to stand in Ithaka, before the Manor./ just at the doorsill of the court. She seemed/ a family friend, the Taphian captain, Mentos..."<sup>11</sup> When she meets Telemakhos and he asks who she is, she says, "As you ask,/ I can account most clearly for myself./ Mentos I'm called..."<sup>12</sup> Or maybe she's not quite so clear. Later Athena appears again to Telemakhos in the form of another familiar figure, as she "came to him,/ putting on Mentor's figure and tone..."<sup>13</sup> As Mentor, she also travels with Telemakhos on a visit to two kings in southern Greece, and during the trip she must repeatedly tell people that she is Mentor, thus reinforcing the falsehood.

It was certainly known to happen in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that gods appeared to mortals in the normal form, as Athena also does later in the *Odyssey*. She is so fond of disguises and false stories, however, that she uses them even at times when they are not really necessary, when she might have appeared as herself. This may be the case for her appearance in a dream by the princess Nausikaa of Phaiakia, when Athena poses as her friend, or when Odysseus first arrives on the island of Phaiakia, and Athena greets him in the form of a very knowledgeable little girl, "a small girl child, hugging a water jug."<sup>14</sup> Another instance of

Athena playing with disguise happens when Odysseus first lands back on his home island of Ithaka, when “Athena came to him from the nearby air,/ putting a young man’s figure on—a shepherd.”<sup>15</sup> Odysseus is impressed by Athena’s easy ability to mislead and lie about who she is, and he calls her “mistress of disguises.”

In addition to the examples provided by Athena, there is evidence in the *Odyssey* that other gods as well were capable of lying. When Odysseus is in danger of drowning after the breakup of his raft, the minor goddess Ino appears to him out of the ocean and offers him a veil, telling him that if he leaves the raft and swims for shore, the veil will protect him: “make my veil your sash; it is not mortal;/ you cannot, now, be drowned or suffer harm.” To this offer of help, Odysseus is suspicious, obviously aware that the gods can lie. “O damned confusion!” he says. “Can this be a ruse/ to trick me from the boat for some god’s pleasure?”<sup>16</sup> The ability of the gods to tell lies is even so well established that they have a way to prove when they are really, truly telling the truth by swearing on the River Styx. Such swearing happens several times in the work of Homer, including when the goddess Calypso offers to let Odysseus build a raft and leave her island. “O goddess,/ what guile is hidden here?” he asks, and requires her to take an oath. Does the goddess become offended at being accused of lying? She replies “not for nothing learned,/ having the wit to ask this thing of me!/ My witness then be earth and sky/ and dripping Styx that I swear by...”<sup>17</sup> Now she cannot be lying, because she has sworn on the Styx, but without that she could not be trusted.

Examples of the ability of the Greek gods to tell lies can also be found in other works of literature. From the *Iliad*, toward the end of the poem, Athena, here as well, supporting the Greeks, wants to draw the Trojan Hector into battle with Achilles. With Hector outside the walls of Troy and running from Achilles, Athena appears to him in the form of his brother Deiphobus. She says to Hector, “Dear brother, how brutally swift Achilles hunts you... Come, let us stand our ground together—beat him back.”<sup>18</sup> Believing that he fights with support, Hector returns to battle, to learn that he was tricked and is facing Achilles alone, who then kills him. In a work called the *Theogony*, by Hesiod, the Muses claim that they are able to lie: “We can say false things like to real things, and whenever we wish, we can utter the truth.” In a final example of the falsehood of Greek gods, I will cite the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite describing the meeting of the goddess with the mortal Anchises. In the Hymn, Aphrodite is trying to entice Anchises, who cannot believe a woman so beautiful that she must be a goddess is interested in him. In response, Aphrodite lies and assures him that she’s merely a mortal, like him.

## CULTURAL VALUE AND A LYING HERO

Perhaps in imitation of the gods, Greek heroes could also use lying as a common tactic. By far the most notable example is Odysseus, who is repeatedly praised by other characters in the *Odyssey* for his “trickiness.” Throughout this poem there are repeated examples of Odysseus concealing his identity, and Helen (of Troy) gives a vivid example. As she tells the story of Odysseus sneaking into the city, she says, “He had, first, given himself an outrageous beating/ and had thrown some rags on—like a household slave—/ then slipped into that city of wide lanes...”<sup>19</sup> Odysseus also conceals his identity when he meets the Cyclops and tells him “My name is Nohbdy; mother, father, and friends,/ everyone calls me Nohbdy.”<sup>20</sup> On the island of Phaiakia as well, Odysseus at first does not reveal who he is. There almost seems to be an element of another aspect of Egyptian religion in this: the concept that knowing someone’s name gives a power over that character. Even when Odysseus finally lands on his home island of Ithaka, he meets Athena (who of course is also in disguise) and he gives her a false story about who he is. As a goddess, of course, she knows the truth and says to him, “You! You chameleon!/ Bottomless bag of tricks! Here in your own country/ would you not give your stratagems a rest/ or stop spellbinding for an instant?”<sup>21</sup> In spite of that speech, Athena helps to disguise Odysseus as an old beggar, and as a beggar he appears to his son, his servants, and his wife. With his wife Penelope, as he has done with other people, he tells a long complicated lie about who he is. At the end of the poem, he is so accustomed to lying, that when he meets his father in perfectly safe circumstances, after having already beaten his enemies, he mysteriously gives his elderly father, whom he has not seen in twenty years, a false story and pretends to be someone else. Odysseus is one of the greatest heroes of Greek literature, and his propensity for conniving, for trickery, for lying is so well known that throughout the poem he is referred to by a variety of epithets to capture this quality: “strategist,” “the great tactician,” “formidable for guile in peace and war,” “the man of ranging mind,” “master of improvisation,” “that sly and guileful man,” “great master of invention,” “master improviser,” “teller of many stories,” The master liar, in other words, and he was much admired in part specifically for that ability.

The example of Odysseus that I have emphasized here is only one literary example, but it is also a ubiquitous and powerful example within ancient Greek culture. The works of Homer were highly valued by all the Greeks, even divided as they were into city-states. References to Homer can be found in many writers of that time, including Plato and Aristotle.

This admiration for the heroes of Homer also occurred in the context of a pantheon in which the gods were known to tell lies. With such a background, it is not a great stretch to conclude that a culture which admired “improvisation” in speech would be open to exploring how to make speech more effectively persuasive. And that, of course, is the study of rhetoric.

Given the origin of studying rhetoric from a cultural admiration of lying, it is understandable that Plato distrusted rhetoric. He was, in fact, so rigidly moral (if we ignore infanticide) that he regarded poets as liars. In spite of his uneasiness, however, even Plato recognized that it is possible to develop the effectiveness of how we use language. He also understood that this is useful, and in *Phaedrus* he gives ideas on how to be a more effective speaker. Whether Aristotle was in rebellion against his old teacher, or whether he followed and developed Plato’s ideas in *Phaedrus*, it is from Aristotle that we first receive comprehensive instructions on how to engage in rhetoric. Eventually the study of rhetoric passed on to the Romans, and from the Romans it came into the Middle Ages, with some Christian alterations, and on down to our own time. And, no wonder, the power of language is irresistible.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Andrea and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History: Vol. I: To 1700* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> David Hutto, “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric,” *Rhetorica*, 20 (2002): 228.

<sup>3</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Vol. I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 75

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 100

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 119

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 148

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 181

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Lawall and Maynard Mack, Eds. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature, Vol. A* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 228.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 230

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 242

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 298

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 382

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 286

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 282

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 198

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 264

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 327



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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 384