

ELENA ERMOLAEVA

St Petersburg State University, Russia
Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland

THE GATES OF HORN AND IVORY AND THE VERB *ΕΛΕΦΑΙΡΟΜΑΙ* (Od. 19, 560–569)

Brief summary

This article is dedicated to the rare verb *ἐλεφαίρομαι*, the key word of the enigmatic passage about the gates of horn and ivory, and Penelopa's false or true dreams (Od. 19, 560–569). In *Iliad* 23, 388 and Hesiod's *Theogony* 330, only two other available instances, *ἐλεφαίρομαι* undoubtedly means 'to inflict harm, to damage'. The aim of this contribution is to show that the meaning 'to cheat, to deceive' for *ἐλεφαίρομαι* might have been invented by lexicographers based on a misreading of the passage in *Odyssey* 19 under the influence of later literary allusions and interpretations of the famous excerpt.

Keywords: Homer, *Odyssey*, *ἐλεφαίρομαι*, *paronomasia*, lexicographic tradition, literary allusions.

This article discusses the old rare epic verb *ἐλεφαίρομαι*, re-evaluating its meaning and re-assessing its lexicographic tradition.

In Homer and Hesiod

The verb *ἐλεφαίρομαι* is available in Greek literature only in three instances. In two of these, the verb means 'to inflict harm, to damage' and seems to be a more expressive synonym of *βλάπτω* 'to harm, damage'.

Il. 23, 388, on the chariot race:

- 384 ὅς ῥά οἱ ἐκ χειρῶν ἔβαλεν μάστιγα φαεινὴν.
τοῖο δ' ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν χύτο δάκρυα χωρομένοιο,
οὔνεκα τὰς μὲν ὄρα ἔτι καὶ πολὺ μᾶλλον ἰούσας,
οἱ δὲ οἱ ἐβλάφθησαν ἄνευ κέντροιο θέοντες.
οὐδ' ἄρ' Ἀθηναίην ἐλεφηράμενος λάθ' Ἀπόλλων
Τυδεΐδην, μάλα δ' ὦκα μετέσσυτο ποιμένα λαῶν,
391 δῶκε δὲ οἱ μάστιγα, μένος δ' ἵπποισιν ἐνήκεν¹

*Apollo ... dashed the shining whip from his hands, so that the tears began to stream from his eyes, for his anger as he watched how the mares of Eumelos drew far ahead of him while his own horses ran without the whip and were slowed.² Yet Athene did not fail to see **the foul play** of Apollo on Tydeus son. She swept in speed to the shepherd of the people and gave him back his whip...*

(R. Lattimore, 5th ed., 1956, 460)

The second occurrence is that of Hesiod's *Theogony* 330, on the Nemean lion:

327 ...**Νεμειαιῖον τε Λέοντα,**
 τόν ῥ' Ἥρη θρέψασα Διὸς κυδρὴ παράκοιτις
 γουνοῖσιν κατένασσε Νεμείης, πῆμ' ἀνθρώποις.
 330 ἔνθ' ἄρ' ὅ γ' οἰκείων ἐλεφαίρετο φῦλ' ἀνθρώπων,

*... and the Nemean lion, which Hera, Zeus's illustrious consort, raised and settled among the hills of Nemea, a woe for human beings. For dwelling there it **destroyed** the tribes of human being...*

(G. W. Most 2006, 31)

Lastly, the verb ἐλεφαίρομαι appears in the famous passage of *Odyssey* 19, 560–569, following Penelope's dream of an eagle killing geese in her backyard. An old disguised beggar, Odysseus *incognito*, explains to her that the eagle is Odysseus himself and the geese – her suitors. Penelope does not believe him and delivers a sophisticated account of the nature of the true and false dreams which come through the horn and ivory gates.³

Ξεῖν', ἧ τοι μὲν ὄνειροι ἀμήχανοι ἀκριτόμουθοι
 γίνοντ', οὐδέ τι πάντα τελείεται ἀνθρώποισι.
 δοιαὶ γάρ τε πύλαι ἀμενηνῶν εἰσὶν ὄνειρων·
 αἰ μὲν γὰρ κεράεσσι τετεύχεται, αἰ δ' ἐλέφαντι.
 τῶν οἱ μὲν κ' ἔλθωσι διὰ πριστοῦ ἐλέφαντος,
 οἳ ῥ' ἐλεφαίρονται, ἔπε' ἀκράαντα φέροντες·
 οἳ δὲ διὰ ξεστῶν κεράων ἔλθωσι θύραζε,
 οἳ ῥ' ἔτυμα κραινουσι, βροτῶν ὅτε κέν τις ἴδηται.
 ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ οὐκ ἐντεῦθεν ὄμοιαι αἰνὸν ὄνειρον
 ἐλθέμεν...⁴

Stranger, dreams verily are baffling and unclear of meaning, and in no wise do they find fulfilment in all things for men. For two are the gates of shadowy dreams, and one is fashioned of horn and one of ivory. Those dreams that pass through the gate of sawn ivory deceive men, bringing words that find no fulfilment. But those that come forth through the gate of polished horn bring true issues to pass, when any mortal sees them. But in my case, it was not from thence, methinks, that my strange dream came.

(A. T. Murray 1995, 269)

In this enigmatic passage, oft discussed in Homeric scholarship,⁵ ἐλεφαίρονται is usually interpreted as ‘cheat, deceive, lie’. The connection between the true and deceptive dreams and the gates of horn and ivory have been attested in Greek tradition first in the *Odyssey* 19⁶ and in allusions afterwards.⁷

The *Scholia* to the *Odyssey* provide several various interpretations of this passage.⁸ The first is that of *synecdoche*, according to which the horn gate signifies eyes, because the eye has *keratoderma*, and the ivory gate – the mouth because of the ivory colour of the teeth. Thus, Penelope relies on the evidence of eyes rather than on that of words.

The same interpretation is offered by Servius:⁹ “Per portam corneam oculi significantur, qui et cornei sunt coloris et duriores ceteris membris: nam frigus non sentiunt, sicut et Cicero dicit in libris de deorum natura. Per eburneam vero portam os significatur a dentibus” (in *Aen.* VI, 883). In our own day, Benjamin Haller has identified the gate of ivory with teeth and deceptive speech and the gate of horn with a hint to the horn bow of Odysseus.¹⁰

The second interpretation is that of physiology. Ivory comes from the mouth, implying that “all those ‘dreams’ seen by someone with a fully belly will be false”, whereas horns are found on one’s head, meaning that truthful dreams come from the head. Such an explanation concerning the nature of dreams was popular in antiquity.¹¹

The next interpretation is that of *paronomasia*. The appearance of the word κέρας is thus connected to the similar-sounding verb κραίνειν (ἔτυμα κραίνουσι) and ἔλεφας, likewise, with ἐλεφαίρονται.

Finally, there is a mythological explanation, according to which the horn-gate dreams come from heaven, because horns point to heaven, namely, to Zeus, meaning that they are true. Ivory-gate dreams, on the other hand, are chthonic, with the tusks of elephants pointing downwards to the kingdom of Hades, and thus destructive in nature.

Eustathius of Thessalonica humorously derided the efforts of grammarians to uncover the riddle: τὰς τῶν ὀνείρων ταύτας θύρας ἐξέτριψαν πολλοὶ τῶν σοφῶν (“many scholars polished these gates of dreams”)¹².

In the 19th century, the predominant point of view was that the verses on the gates of dream had been interpolated,¹³ as Penelope could not have come forth with such an intellectual speech in the spirit of sophistic declamations. In the 20th century, Highbarger¹⁴ concluded that the horn gates meant that the gates were adorned with horns. Such a practice was widespread in the Mediterranean, the Orient and in Egypt, where the horns of bulls symbolized the coming of life force. The gates of ivory Highbarger compared to the heavenly gates of the Olympic gods on the ground of the sparkling whiteness of the clouds.

I myself agree with those ancient and modern scholars who privilege the role of *paronomasia*,¹⁵ though, after the appearance of Highbarger’s work, such a point of view admittedly seems naïve.

After Hesiod, **ἐλεφαίρομαι** is no longer attested in any literary text, only in *scholia* and lexicographers. To the three literary occurrences, I would also add the proper name Ἐλεφήνωρ (*Il.* 2, 541), which derives from ἐλεφαίρω (*Ἐλεφηρ-ήνωρ) and probably means ‘one who kills people’.¹⁶ The *scholia* for *Il.* 2, 541, cod. Genevensi gr. 44 read, as follows: Ἐλεφήνωρ πεποιήται παρὰ τὸ ἐλεφαίρεσθαι αὐτὸν καὶ βλάπτοντα τοὺς πολεμίους.¹⁷

In lexicographers and dictionaries

In lexicographic tradition, the meaning of the verb **ἐλεφαίρεσθαι** is compared with those of βλάπτειν, φθείρειν, ἀδικεῖν and/or with ἀπατᾶν:

Apollonius Sophista (1st c. AD): <ἐλεφαίρονται> βλάπτουσι καὶ ἐξαπατῶσι.¹⁸

Aelius Herodianus (2nd–3rd cc. AD): the verb ἐλεφαίρω is derived from ἔλπω ‘to hope’ or connected with ἐλέφας ‘elephant’: λέγει δὲ δύνασθαι τὸ ἐλεφαίρω παρὰ τὸ ζῶον εἰρησθαι (159).¹⁹

Hesychius (5th or 6th cc. AD): **ἐλεφαίρεσθαι**: ἐξαπατᾶν, βλάπτειν, ἀδικεῖν.²⁰

Suda (10th c.): <**Ελεφαίρετο**> ἐπλανᾶτο, ἐβλάπτετο. <Ελεφήραι:> βλάψαι, ἀπατῆσαι.²¹

Etymologicum Gudianum (11th c.): <[[Ελεφήνωρ]]> <B 540>· παρὰ τὸ
ἐλεφαίρεσθαι αὐτὸν καὶ βλάπτειν τοὺς πολεμίους. ἢ παρὰ τὸ
ἐλεφαίρω, τὸ βλάπτω· βλαπτικὸν γὰρ τὸ [[ζῶον]].²²

Robert Beekes follows Pierre Chantraine regarding the etymology of ἐλεφαίρομαι as having an “unstable meaning, unclear formation and uncertain etymology”.²³ Chantraine and Beekes compare the root with that of ὀλοφώϊος ‘dangerous, killing, noxious, deceitful’, the etymology of which is unclear but possibly derives from ὄλλυμι ‘to destroy’.²⁴ In Homer, it is an epithet of δήνεα ‘dangerous plans’, in Nic. *Th.* of ἴος ‘killing poison’. One unclear word is thus explained through another uncertain one and *vice versa*.

The *LSJ* and the *Lfgre*, following lexicographic tradition, present two meanings for ἐλεφαίρομαι: ‘to cheat, overreach’ and ‘to destroy’; ‘heimtückisch, durch Täuschung Schaden zufügen’.

On ἐλεφαίρομαι as ‘to cheat’

As we have seen, lexicographers combined both meanings of the verb ἐλεφαίρεσθαι: ‘to damage’ from the *Iliad* and Hesiodus and ‘to cheat’ from the *Odyssey*, or else present the only meaning ‘to cheat’. The question is whether this verb really belongs to the lexical-semantic field ‘lie’? In the *Iliad* 23, 388 and in Hesiod’s *Theogony* 330, it undoubtedly means ‘to damage, to destroy’.

It seems to me that the interpretation of the dream of Penelope as false was influenced by the numerous later imitations of and allusions to Homeric verses. By these later references, I mean, above all, “the influence of Vergil’s famous imitation, *Aeneid* 6, 893–896, with its opposition between *veræ umbræ* and *falsa somnia*”.²⁵

Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur
cornea, qua *veris* facilis datur exitus *umbris*,
altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
sed *falsa* ad caelum mittunt *insomnia* manes.

However, in Vergil’s imitation of Homer there is no word play, as there had been in the *Odyssey*; rather, the dreams are referred to as *falsa insomnia*²⁶ and *veræ umbræ*.²⁷ *Veræ umbræ* seems to allude to Homer’s expression οἱ ὅ’ ἔτυμα κραίνουσι [those dreams] which really fulfil, which

stands in contrast not to ἐλεφαίρονται but rather to ἔπε' ἀκράαντα (i.e., οἱ ῥ' ἐλεφαίρονται, ἔπε' ἀκράαντα φέροντες 'those dreams are dangerous/damaging, bringing words that find no fulfilment'), especially since this connection is emphasized with the alliteration κραινουσι-ἀκράαντα.

In Homer, moreover, one should discern different kinds of dreams: ὄνειρος, ὄνειρατα, ὄναρ²⁸ 'nightmares and dreams, dream experience' and ὕπνος 'sleepiness'. Nightmares and ghost dreams usually come or fly to men and possess still another important quality – the ability to speak. Quite often, such dreams are called 'fateful' – κακός 'bad' (*Il.* 10, 496), οὖλος 'fatal' (*Il.* 2, 6; 2, 8), and αἰνός 'horrible' (*Od.* 19, 569) – unlike ὕπνοι, which are accompanied with positive epithets: ἡδύς 'pleasant' *Od.* 1, 363; 16, 450 al.; γλυκύς 'sweet' *Od.* 2, 395; 8, 445 al.; and others.

Penelope herself calls her dream 'horrible' αἰνὸν ὄνειρον (569). It seems, then, that she believes that the dream can do damage. Those dreams that come from ivory gates are described as destructive, expressed with the verb ἐλεφαίρονται. As there is no evidence of a pre-Homeric tale, which would have connected dreams to gates of ivory and horn, it would seem more plausible for the elusive characterization of ivory (ἐλέφαντι and ἐλέφαντος) to have arisen from the word-play with the verb ἐλεφαίρονται and not *vice versa*. Tusks of elephants and horns of bulls are furthermore well suited as images for such an antithesis²⁹. This is one possible reason why κέρασ emerges next to ἐλέφας. The word κέρασ supplies the consonantal impetus behind the use of the verb κραίνειν in the expression ἔτυμα κραινουσι, used instead of verbs which would usually express the idea of dreams coming true τελευτᾶν, τελεῖσθαι (*Il.* 2, 36; *Od.* 19, 561); ἔπε' ἀκράαντα, on the other hand, stands in contrast to ἔτυμα κραινουσι.

Such *paronomasia* and etymological puns are numerous in Homer.³⁰

As shown above, nothing is unusual about dreams being destructive or horrible. Therefore, ἐλεφαίρονται in the above the *Odyssey* passage could be understood simply as 'to harm, to destroy'.³¹ It seems that the almost solitary voice of Russo³² might be right in arguing that the meaning 'to cheat' for ἐλεφαίρομαι can only have been an invention by lexicographers based on a misreading of the passage in the *Odyssey*; I only add that commonly accepted translation of ἐλεφαίρομαι was influenced with later literary allusions and interpretations of the famous place in the *Odyssey* 19; it, repeated numerous, has got strength of tradition.³³

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- ¹ *Homeri Ilias*. M. West (rec.). Vol. 2. Stuttgartiae et Lipsiae, Munich : Teubneri, 2000.
- ² Literary, ‘were damaged’.
- ³ This passage is regarded as the first allegoric account of dreams in ancient Greek literature (Hopfner 1937, 2233–2245).
- ⁴ Homerus. *Odyssea*. M. West (rec.). Berlin, Boston : De Gruyter, 2017.
- ⁵ The problems of interpretation are as follows: is the account on gates and dreams a popular myth or an invention of the author of the *Odyssey*? What did Greeks believe about the nature of dreams? Why do ivory and horn emerge in the context of dreams, etc.? The most recent studies containing full bibliographies include the following: Haller 2009, 397–417; Catalin 2010, 65–72; Schulte 2016, 82–91.
- ⁶ Ivory and horn were known to Greeks since Mycenaean time. The words *e-re-pa*, *e-re-pa-te-jo*, *ke-ra* and *ke-ra-a* were recorded on tablets in *Knossos and Pylos*. (Nordheider. *Lieferung* 11, 531–532); *ke-ra* KN RA 984 and *ke-ra-a* KN K 872. Curiously, in spite of their knowledge about ivory, Greeks were apparently ignorant for some time about the existence of real elephants (Treu, 1955, 151). In any case, the first mention of these wondrous animals appears only in Herodotus (III, 114; IV, 191). Thus, the word **ἐλέφας** can only mean ‘ivory’ in Homer. Horn and ivory are elsewhere in Homer never related to dreams, gates, truth or falsehood (Lorimer, 1936, 32–33).
- ⁷ The gates of dreams are alluded to in Plato, *Charm.* 173a; *Anth. Pal.* VII, 42; Lucian, *Ver. Hist.* II, 32–33; Philostr. *Imag.* I, 27; Nonn. *Dion.* XXXIV, 90; XLIV, 53; Vergil, *Aen.* VI, 898; Horace, *Carm.* III, 27, 39f.; Statius, *Silvae*, V, 4, 298–300, Ausonius *Ephemer.* VIII, 24–26, etc., and are frequently quoted during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; even today, the image is recalled by those who study the nature of dreams (Lepage 2012, 146–148).
- ⁸ Scholia Graeca in Homeri Odysseam ex codicis aucta et emendata / ed. G. Dindorf. Oxonii, 1855. Vol. 2, 685–686.
- ⁹ Servius, *In Vergilii carmina commentarii*, ed. G. Ch. Thilo and H. Hagen. Lipsiae & Berolini : Teubneri, 1923, v. II, 122.
- ¹⁰ Haller, 2009, 404–406. The author offers the complicated explanation that Penelope, who seems to recognize Odysseus in the old beggar, hints to him of the future purpose of his bow.
- ¹¹ This is pointed out, e.g., by Plato (*Resp.* 571c–572a) and Cicero (*De div.* I, 19, 60–61; *Tusc.* IV, 10).
- ¹² Eustathius. *Commentarii ad Homeri Odysseam* / ed. G. Stallbaum. Vol. 2. Leipzig, 1826, 22–23.
- ¹³ Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1927, 87; Amory 1966, 5.
- ¹⁴ Highbarger 1940.
- ¹⁵ Hundt 1935; Treu 1955, 157; Carpenter 1956, 101; for my own arguments, see Ermolaeva 2007, 3–14.
- ¹⁶ Chantraine, 1970, 338.
- ¹⁷ Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem (Scholia Vetera) / rec. Hartmat Erbse. Vol. I. Berolini: De Gruyter, 1969, 301.
- ¹⁸ Apollonii Sophistae lexicon homericum / Rec. I. Bekker. Hildesheim, 1967. S.v.
- ¹⁹ Περί παθῶν, Aelius Herodianus, *Περί παθῶν*, Grammatici Graeci 3.2, Lentz : Teubner, 1868.
- ²⁰ Hesychii Alexandrini Lexicon / rec. Kurt Latte. Vol. II. Haunia, Ejnar Munksgaard, 1966, 66.
- ²¹ Svidae Lexicon / ed. Ada Adler. Pars II. Lipsiae : Teubneri, 1931, 245.

- ²² Etymologicum Gudianum quod vocatur / rec. ed. Aloysius de Stefani. Fasc. II, Lipsiae : Teubneri, 1920, 455.
- ²³ Chantraine 1970, 338; Beekes, 2010, 409.
- ²⁴ *Lfgre*. Lieferung 11, 530; *LSJ*, s.v. ὄλοφῶϊος.
- ²⁵ Joseph Russo writes about the influence of Vergil's allusion to the interpretation of *Od.* 19 (Russo 1992, 103).
- ²⁶ Servius explains that *insomnia* is tantamount to *somnia*; however, there is a certain difference: *insomnia* implies 'dreaming' while *somnia* is 'the state of sleeping' (*Vergilii carmina commentarii*, ed. Georg Christian Thilo and Hermann Hagen. Lipsiae & Berolini : Teubneri 1923, v. II, 122–123).
- ²⁷ Yet another mystery arises in Virgil's work: why did Anchises send Æneas and Sibyl through the ivory gates? Possibly because they were by no means *bona fide* shadow-inhabitants of the underworld kingdom. (Austin, 1977, 275–276). The *opinio communis* seems to be that the widespread belief among Romans was that false dreams occur before midnight, while real dreams come only after midnight. In this manner, Virgil indicates that Aeneas and Sibyl have left the kingdom of the dead, together with false dreams, prior to midnight (Everett 1900, 153–154; Norden 1934, 348; Fletcher 1955, 101–102).
- ²⁸ *Lfgre*. Lieferung 17, 706–707.
- ²⁹ According to the evidence in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, ivory seems to have been an expensive material which mostly symbolized the luxury of royal palaces, whereas horn was common and cheap.
- ³⁰ Rank, 1951.
- ³¹ Amory, 1966, 21–24.
- ³² Russo, 1992, 103.
- ³³ Murray even translates *Il.* 23, 388, thus: "But Athene was not unaware of Apollo's **cheating** of the son of Tydeus" (Murray 1967, 523).

ABBREVIATIONS

- Lfgre* Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos / Begr. von B. Snell. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955–2010.
- LSJ* A Greek-English Lexicon. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. R. Jones (eds.). Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1996.
- RE* Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft. A. Pauly (ed.). Neu bearb. begonnen von G. Wissowa, W. Kroll. Stuttgart : Druckenmüller, 1893–1978.

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RAGA UN ZILOŅKAULA VĀRTI UN VERBS ΕΛΕΦΑΙΡΟΜΑΙ (OD. 19, 562–567)

KOPSAVILKUMS

Slavenā un mīklainā epizode par vārtiem, kas vieni celti no raga un otri no ziloņkaula, kā arī Pēnelopes maldīgie un patiesie sapņi (Od. 19, 560–569) *aizvien ir viens no neatrisinātiem jautājumiem Homēra tekstu pētniecībā*. Rakstā galvenā uzmanība pievērsta epizodes atslēgvārdam, proti, verbam ΕΛΕΦΑΙΡΟΜΑΙ, kam nav īsti skaidra nedz nozīme, nedz etimoloģija. Galvenais jautājums – vai šis darbības vārds tiešām pieder *melu* leksiski semantiskā lauka perifērijai. *Īliadā* (23, 388) un Hēsioda *Teogonijā* (330) tam neapšaubāmi piemīt nozīmes ‘sagraut’, ‘izpostīt’. Saskaņā ar vārdnīcu *opinio communis* šī verba nozīme *Odisejā* (19, 560) ir ‘mānīt’, ‘krāpt’. Pamatoti, šķiet, var pieņemt, ka šī nozīme ir leksikogrāfu radīta – tā balstīta uz epizodes interpretāciju par maldīgiem sapņiem. Izrādās, ka šo interpretāciju ietekmējuši neskaitāmi vēlākie atdarinājumi un alūzijas uz Homēra vārsēm (piem., Verg. Aen. 6, 893–896: ... *altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto, / sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia manes*). Etimoloģiskā vārdu spēle, *paronomasia* vārdam ΕΛΕΦΑΣ (ziloņkauls) – ΕΛΕΦΑΙΡΟΝΤΑΙ un ΚΕΡΑΣ (rags) – ΚΡΑΙΝΟ varētu būt iespējamais skaidrojums Homēra minētajiem vārtiem, kas vieni celti no raga, otri no ziloņkaula, kā arī sapņiem, kuri dodas tiem cauri.