Wordplay and exclusion in ancient Greek epic and the magical papyri

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1 The *Nobody*-pun: in magical thought, a person's name belongs to the class of elements amenable to manipulation like body parts such as hair, nails etc. and personal belongings. For protective purposes names may therefore be under a strong taboo, and withholding one's name -- an act of excluding others from this crucial knowledge -- may be a life-saving act. In the Homeric story of Odysseus and Polyphemus, the hero's pun of identifying himself as *Outis/Mētis* 'Nobody' -- an act of exclusion -- saves his and his comrades' lives, while, when at a safe distance from the monster, he exposes himself to the cyclops' curse by revealing his real and full name to him -- an act of inclusion and hybris (cf. Austin 1972).

2 A stock element of the Greek magical papyri is knowing and writing down (καταγράφειν) the full name(s) of the victim(s), usually further identified by the mother's name (*quia pater incertus*), and knowing and using the secret names of demons and divinities which are thereby put to the service of the practitioner. In contrast to wordplay understood as consciously produced semantic ambiguity, these names are not (or not mainly) effective by a concealed meaning unavailable to some of the interlocutors, but by their very existence, their phonological form and, in most cases, their morphological and semantic opacity, often combined with features otherwise seen in playful and poetic language use such as palindromes (e.g., *ablanathanalba*) and parallelism (e.g., *maskelli maskello*). As elements believed to provide those who know them with full control over their referents, they, too, create a strict division between in- and out-group comparable to wordplay which excludes those who cannot grasp the other meaning. Both by knowing the name and by knowing another meaning, the speaker is empowered to direct and manipulate the discourse or other areas of reality according to their wishes. The paper will argue that wordplay and name magic may intersect at least in these two ways: wordplay may be used to conceal (and maybe also artfully hint at) the real name and the real name may itself consist of a wordplay.

References

Austin, Norman. 1972. "Name Magic in the Odyssey." *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 5: 1–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/25010630.