

Nov 1 03

I ask why the Greek word *em-pei-ro-tokos*, which means having had the experience of giving birth to a child, is masculine and neuter but not feminine. Why is there *emperiotokos* and *empeiotokon*, but not *empeiotiké*, and people say I am naïve or parochial about the use of gender in Greek and other languages where it is still employed.

English has very little gender left. We can point to a ship being feminine, but in general we don't assign gender to things the way they do in other languages. My question is supposed to reflect limitations on my part and while I would not deny having those limitations, the Greek language does distinguish *adelphé* and *adelphos*, sister and brother, in just the way I in my naïve, parochial, English way would.

Since Greek sometimes uses gender just the way I would, when it does not, it seems reasonable to ask why. Gender in Greek sometimes means nothing, sometimes means something dead right (just what I and anyone would say) and sometimes means something dead wrong – like there being a masculine and a neuter for having had the experience of giving birth to a child, but not a feminine.

I find both the dead right and the dead wrong interesting, but the dead wrong is more interesting to me because it is ironic. The Greeks loved irony, in this particular case, the irony of having *emperiotokos* and *empeiotokon*, but *not* *empeiotiké*. Not having the feminine tells you something. It is not clear exactly what it tells you. Perhaps it merely points to the obvious truth. If Greek used *empeiotiké*, it would be saying what we all know. By refusing to use *empeiotiké*, Greek is alluding to what we all know, without saying it.

Irony is as “important” as whatever the absence of irony is – causality, perhaps. Things happen *because* they are ironically correct as much as *because* they are *caused* to happen or perhaps I should say that even if *more* things happen because they are caused to happen, the “important” things happen because it is ironically correct that they should.

The Greek love of irony can be seen in another Greek word, related to *empeiotokos*. The word is *empeiorow*. It means having the experience of having had a bone stuck in one's throat, or possible of having been impaled on a javelin. The Greeks had a great way with words.