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Class Warfare: Thersites in the *Iliad*

William Schreiber-Stainthorp

In Book 2 of the *Iliad*, Homer writes about the confrontation between Thersites and Odysseus. The two men are archetypes of polar opposites: one a hero, the other a craven. Odysseus, the prized commander, represents the former: powerful, commanding, and violent. Thersites, a lowly member of the army, embodies the latter: troublesome, weak, and obnoxious. Thersites' outburst against kingly Agamemnon, his confrontation with Odysseus, and his cruel public punishment provide the foundation for a book that fetishizes bravery, strength, and above all, respect. The progression sheds light on the class conflicts and tenuous structure of Agamemnon's army, rife with flaws and on the precipice of disaster.

Homer begins the passage with a vitriolic discourse on Thersites' appearances. For Homer, a man's physique is inextricably linked to a man's virtue. In a book that revolves around combat, physical prowess is understandably exalted and often used as a proxy for honor. Heroes are described as hulking physical specimens: revered for their bodies and abilities. Conversely, Thersites is a consummate weakling, disdained by all. He is "the ugliest man" in the army, crippled and "bandy-legged" "with one foot clubbed" (2.250-251). His "shoulders humped together, curving over his caved-in chest" (2.252-253) and "his skull was warped to a point, sprouting scraggly, woolly hair" (2.254-255). Thersites is filthy, frail, and fearful. Hunched over and limping about, he is a worthless soldier.

Thersites' disgraceful appearance is important because, in addition to embodying his commoner status, it influences how his opinions are received. Though Thersites speaks the truth, his low status- both physically and socially- preclude others from siding with him. When he says that Atrides – one of Agamemnon's many honorifics – gets "the lion's share of booze, plenty of women too" (2.264) and profits while his soldiers do all the work, Thersites is not fabricating grievances. Admittedly, he angers some by suggesting they mutiny and sail "home" and by calling the soldiers "soft friends, wretched excuses- women, not men" (2.274-2.275). However, his point is that the men could and should return- proudly- to their motherlands. But whereas a muscle-bound hero like Achilles might be said to be insightful and courageously vocal when he confronts an unjust Agamemnon in Book 1, and a high-ranking commander like Odysseus might be seen as wise and brave when telling Agamemnon he is speaking "nonsense" (14.112) later on, hideous and lowly Thersites is reviled by the troops and called "insubordinate" (2.248) for his comparable protest. The speech and its reception reveal many of the problems that plague Agamemnon's army, a weary and war-torn bunch, as they grapple with low morale and self-destructive principles.

Throughout the epic, Achaean soldiers must be begged, scorned, and threatened in order to take up arms against the Trojans. Having fought for a decade on behalf of an angry cuckold, the army lacks any compelling narrative to fight for. Just prior to Thersites' appearance, when Agamemnon gave his soldiers the (disingenuous) chance to leave, nearly everyone frantically and joyously began to do so. Clearly, there are significant cracks in the army's structure. However, the same forces that oppress the army prevent them from unifying to revolt. Fragmented by rank, country, and wealth, they are little more than a band of mercenaries,

disloyal and discontent. Resentment, selfishness, and homesickness run rampant, breeding distrust and animosity within and between the ranks.

In lieu of a cause, the Achaean forces have only glory and treasure to motivate them. Glory is elusive and abstract, while treasure is being siphoned off by the all-too-often sedentary Agamemnon. The king's greed threatens to dissolve the army that satiates it. By taking too much of the one thing the soldiers can hope for, Agamemnon risks incurring widespread dissension. This might seem at odds with Thersites' cold reception. While Thersites' accusations of greed on the part of Agamemnon must have been shared by much of the army, their negative reactions can be explained by their skewed value system, which emphasizes who's speaking – not what's said.

The offense the Achaeans feel stems from the belief that Thersites is dramatically out of place - he has crossed a boundary by speaking so rudely to such a superior. Thersites angrily denounces Agamemnon, "the high and mighty commander" (2.272) who is lucky to have escaped the wrath of "the greater man" (2.278) Achilles. While Thersites' inflammatory remarks are bold, Achilles himself had called Agamemnon a "king who devours his people" (1.270) with no accompanying uproar amongst the ranks. In contrast, as Thersites begins "taunting the king with strings of cutting insults," (2.259) his compatriots are "furious with him, deeply offended" (2.260). Rather than being praised for his protest, he is derided as being "full of obscenities, teeming with rant" (2.247). While the crowd will stand for a brave warrior questioning authority, they will not tolerate the impropriety of a simple soldier doing the same. Neither, it appears, will Odysseus.

The famed commander is a fearsome figure in this passage. He "stepped in quickly, faced [Thersites] down with a dark glance and threats to break his nerve" (2.283-284). Odysseus' powerful physical presence sharply contrasts the feeble Thersites. Odysseus stands against Thersites but does not question the veracity of his statements, an important distinction. Instead, he challenges Thersites, "Who are *you* to wrangle with kings, you alone? No one, I say- no one alive less soldierly than you" (2.287-288). Thersites does not have a right to be heard, even if what he says carries truth. Odysseus admits that the "fighters give Atrides the lion's share of all our plunder" but asserts that Thersites is an "outrage" for speaking in such a manner to the "marshal of armies," Agamemnon (2.297-300).

Ironically, as Odysseus confronts Thersites, he is wielding Agamemnon's scepter. Just prior to the confrontation, Agamemnon is seen "leaning his weight upon that kingly scepter" (2.127), dependent on an inherited stick for support. Odysseus "relieve[s] him of his father's royal scepter" (2.215), symbolically assuming power while Agamemnon sits idly by. This symbolizes many of Thersites' grievances about Agamemnon's inept leadership. By making Thersites' complaints appear more rational, it emphasizes how little rationality matters in the face of power. Thersites is rejected outright, all the more striking when it becomes clear he is right. He is not heard, simply because he is not important.

The punishment for Thersites' disobedience is to maliciously reinforce the military hierarchy by way of a public beating. After Odysseus, superior to Thersites in rank and body, "cracked the scepter across his back and shoulders," "the rascal doubled over, tears streaking his face" (2.309-2.311). "A blood welt bulged up between his blades" and the assembled soldiers erupted with "good hearty laughter" (2.312-317).

The beating has two critical effects: first, it disciplines Thersites, cementing the military order, and second, it prevents a rebellion by turning an erstwhile leader into a scapegoat. Thersites is chastened by the beating itself, which will cause him to think twice before next stepping beyond his bounds. He, along with the other soldiers, learns the consequences of forgetting one's place in the social order. When pain becomes associated with speaking out, uprisings weaken and tyrannies ascend, secure in their power to silence opposition. Additionally, Thersites is shamed in front of all by the beating and his pathetic tears. His humiliation prevents other soldiers from uniting and creating trouble with him because associating with such a weak, sniveling creature would be a great embarrassment. Any burgeoning movement towards mutiny is squashed- the potential ringleader discredited and disgraced.

Thersites' punishment shows his peers that he has done something grossly inappropriate. By breaking rank, he committed a grievous sin. Ironically, this deflection of blame is away from Agamemnon and onto the man who represented the soldiers' interests. Thersites embodied the beliefs and complaints that many of his peers undoubtedly shared but were too scared, dutiful, or clever to express. Irony aside, the ability for the soldiers to take out their anger and resentment on someone or something is cathartic and trumps any movement towards solidarity. The text describes how the men, whose "morale was low" (3.318), were suddenly and dramatically uplifted by the punishment of such a coward, perhaps feeling self-righteous that they themselves succeeded in restraining their own desires to "cut and run for home" (2.292). Thus, in one (literal) stroke, Agamemnon took major steps towards strengthening the unity and loyalty of his men.

The passage is notable for the very obvious distaste the narrator has for Thersites. Though many of the lines are dialogue, the focus and wording make it clear that Thersites is not to be liked. As discussed before, many lines are dedicated to a revolting description of Thersites. Not only his appearance but also his actions are described with malice. He is said to be "hollering," "spewing," "babbling," "flinging indecencies," "hurling abuse," "ranting slander," and "blithering on" (2.258, 2.261, 2.290, 2.291, 2.297, 2.302). Granted, many of these phrases come from Odysseus, but the narrator is undoubtedly disgusted with Thersites on account of his gall and impropriety. The narrator seems outraged over Thersites' very existence – a nuisance that distracts from the true heroes. This is emphasized in the narrator's use of epithets in the passage. Epithets connote a degree of respect and are notably absent from all descriptions of Thersites, who is presented unadorned and unattractive. The man he torments, on the other hand, is called "majestic Agamemnon" (2.258), "mighty Atrides" (2.262), "the famous field marshal" (2.282), and "the son of Atreus, Agamemnon" (2.298). The references to Agamemnon's power and lineage, and the lack of any such information for Thersites, emphasize the power imbalance between the two and make Thersites' actions even more astounding.

It is telling that Thersites is the only common soldier to be given a significant amount of space in the epic. His short-lived presence and firm repudiation make it clear that the epic is about heroism, not activism. Thersites surfaces early in the book in order to explain why no other lowly figures will be occupying the spotlight. After quickly establishing a precedent for how the regular man ought to act and be treated, the text can freely ignore tedious and trivial commoners, focusing instead on the kings, warriors, and gods who transfix and transform us.

One might argue that the story of Thersites is just an interesting scene, not a castigation of dissension and cowardice. After all, Achilles himself spent half of the epic brooding instead of

fighting, yet he was and remains a hero. If Homer can endorse a man like Achilles, who watches his countrymen die while refusing to leave his beachside tent, then he isn't saying that dissent or cowardice is inherently bad.

However, Achilles and Thersites are two very distinct characters, with very dissimilar grievances. The difference between Achilles and Thersites is that Achilles' anger was warranted. Thersites complained about giving treasure to Agamemnon, but it's obvious that crippled Thersites did not and could not accomplish much on the battlefield. Achilles, on the other hand, is an unmatched warrior who undoubtedly adds great wealth to Agamemnon's coffers, giving his words and threats of inactivity real power and respectability. By virtue of his military prowess, Achilles substantiates his complaints. Furthermore, Achilles doesn't even complain about giving Agamemnon treasure. What angers Achilles is the fact that Agamemnon steals his slave, not out of greed but out of spite. This is an intentional slight to Achilles – Agamemnon brazenly asserting his dominance. The disagreement, once financial, thus becomes personal. Therefore, when Achilles chooses not to participate in the war, it's less dissent than it is a justified defense of his own honor. Homer is endorsing heroic principles, not political protest.

To better understand the issues that Thersites' presence raises, one should consult other Homeric texts along with contemporaneous texts. It would be useful to discover the patterns in how they portrayed commoners and heroes. That way, we can better explain the significance of Thersites, the famous lowly soldier. Though brief, Thersites' role is vital as both a plot device and cultural barometer. His rant and its aftermath illuminate the socioeconomic issues and class conflicts that the epic is built upon. Thersites exposes the psychology and emotional volatility of the thousands of common soldiers we hear from only in dying- nameless fodder for heroes.

Bibliography

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