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Article Notes and Presentation

Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology in the Iliad

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Homer, & Wilson, E. R. (2023). The Iliad. W.W. Norton and Company.

Introduction:

When “the ugliest man who marched on Troy” is beaten by Odysseus and laughed at by the Greek soldiers, scholars tend to view the scene as a reinforcement and representation of a particular class ideology. Scholars go even further and argue that Homer and the contemporary audience of *The Iliad* would’ve been in support of this class ideology. However, Thalmann rejects this view. In this paper, Thalmann sets out to highlight the complexities of the Thersites scene that challenge the prevailing scholarly view that Homer and the contemporary audience would’ve been in support of this class ideology. More broadly, Thalmann hopes to question the relationship between the text and the conditions and ideology of the society in which it was created. Thalmann focuses on how the narrative of the scene questions the idea of authority, then he focuses on the importance of comedy, Thersites’ physical description, and scapegoating. Before that, I’ve created a synopsis of the Thersites scene for anyone who needs a reminder.

Chronology of Thersites Scene:

In Book 2, Agamemnon receives a “baneful dream” from Zeus that says that now is the moment to arm the Greek troops and take Troy (Iliad 27-43) -> Agamemnon then tells the war council (Menelaus, Nestor, Odysseus etc.) about his dream and states his intention to test the will of the Greek troops by ordering them to return home (Iliad 67-94) -> Nestor is surprised by the dream, stating he wouldn’t believe it if it came from any other man (Iliad 97-102) -> Agamemnon makes his speech to the Greek troops, telling them that Zeus has “played an evil trick on me” by sending him home dishonorably, because they cannot expect to take Troy and need to return home (Iliad 133-168) -> The army takes Agamemnon's speech at face value and start rushing towards their ships, hoping to go home (Iliad 169-181) -> Odysseus intervenes taking Agamemnon’s sceptre from him, using his words and sceptre he manages to get the Greek troops to return to the meeting place

(Iliad 216-250) -> The text states about the Greek soldiers "They were enraged" with an unclear subject of that rage, it's arguably Agamemnon for deceiving them (Iliad 267) -> Then Thersites appears, after receiving a harsh detailed explanation of his ugliness and deformity by the narrator, Thersites gives a speech where he criticizes Agamemnon, pointing out his greediness, the unequal distribution of war loot, and advocates for leaving Troy (Iliad 254-292) -> Thersites is then berated and beat by Odysseus using Agamemnon's sceptre (Iliad 296-329) -> The Greek troops laugh at Thersites, and are seemingly no longer enraged, but unified against the Trojans once again (Iliad 330-337)

Section 1: Authority

Using the narrative described above, Thalmann points out several ways in which the idea of authority is called into question or outright undermined.

1. Zeus directly deceives Agamemnon, who is supposed to be his chosen human leader, undermining Agamemnon's legitimation of authority
2. Agamemnon takes his dream at face value, despite its unbelievability, and only Nestor comes close to being skeptical, showing a failure of logical thinking
3. Agamemnon's test to the Greek troops backfires immensely, like Agamemnon with Zeus' dream, the soldiers take his speech at face value
4. Agamemnon is seemingly frozen once the Greeks start running to the ships
5. Agamemnon's failure almost ruins Zeus' entire plan for the war
6. Odysseus takes Agamemnon's sceptre and controls the crowd, usurping Agamemnon's authority
7. Ironically, only Thersites is capable of relieving tensions between the elites and the common soldiers, precisely what Agamemnon initially set out to do

These points raise questions about whether Agamemnon should be the one in charge. Thalmann points out that if the intention of Homer was to straightforwardly reinforce a class ideology, why did he create a narrative full of irony and undermining of Agamemnon?

Section 2: Comedy and Appearance

Continuing from the idea that Thersites is the one that calmed tensions between the elites and common soldiers, Thalmann focuses on the importance of Thersites' role as a comedic character. First, Thalmann argues that Thersites is an exaggerated, or parodic, embodiment of the personality and views of the other common soldiers. As a result, Thersites has a parodic distance between himself and the common soldiers. Meaning, Thersites is neither viewed as an elite or commoner, but an outsider. Thalmann argues that it's this perception of Thersites that allows for his beating to be a comedic moment that

relieves tension between the two groups, not enflame it. Second, Thalmann focuses on the role of parodic distance between Thersites and the audience. Thalmann argues that by switching the story to a low mimetic mode (seeing the story from the bottom, non-idealized), the audience can see Greek society from the bottom and learn that the complexities of Greek society is too complicated to be represented by the words and perspective of the heroes.

Thalmann also takes a moment to rebuke the argument that Homer must've been opposed to Thersites because of the harsh and extensive description of Thersites' deformities. Using his from Section 1, Thalmann argues that the narrative undercuts the idea that appearance correlates with goodness because Agamemnon, a handsome and powerful man, is shown acting in poor judgement. Meaning,

Section 3: Scapegoating

In this section analyzes Thersites' role as a scapegoat. For our purposes, a scapegoat is someone one who bears the blame and/or punishment for others, or someone who aggrievement is displaced on. Thersites is a scapegoat for the tensions between the elites and common soldiers, the feud between Achilles and Agamemnon, and potentially all the pent-up frustration from the first nine years of the war. Thalmann brings up Rene Girard's theory of the scapegoat, where a collective problem is displaced and concealed by violence on a single individual. Thersites is a clear example of this, but so is Achilles, who has his lover Breseis taken from him over resolution to the collective problem of the plague. Thalmann goes onto to distinguish Thersites and Achilles, arguing Thersites is a comedic scapegoat, his harm created comedy and relief, and Achilles as a tragic scapegoat, whose harm created violence and death. Thalmann raises a parallel between Hephaestus and Thersites, both of whom are comedic scapegoats. In Book 1 of *The Iliad*, in a tense moment where Hera and Zeus are in an argument, the other gods laugh at the way Hephaestus wobbles around serving wine, relieving the tension. Additionally, the parallel between Hephaestus' and Thersites' physical deformity must be noted. Overall, Thalmann argues scapegoats' function within and support the class ideology present in *The Iliad*, particularly in crises.

Conclusion:

Thalmann argues it would be fair to say that the Thersites scene clearly presents a class ideology, a challenge to that ideology, and a solution to that challenge. However, the text also presents a narrative that undercuts the class ideology and questions its resolution. Furthermore, Thalmann admits that that however complex or indirect, the Thersites scene likely bares some relation to social problems of Homer's time. However, he thinks there's

insufficient evidence to show what Homer or the contemporary audience thought about Thersites and the scene. Thalmann stresses the importance of separating the attitude of the characters within the story and those of Homer and the audience. After all, evidence suggests that Homer's era of changing political and social relationships. Ultimately, Thalmann argues that the Thersites scene should not be seen as neutral on the social structure of *The Iliad*, or a weapon of the ruling class, but as complex scene steeped in ideology, reflecting a complex and changing society.