

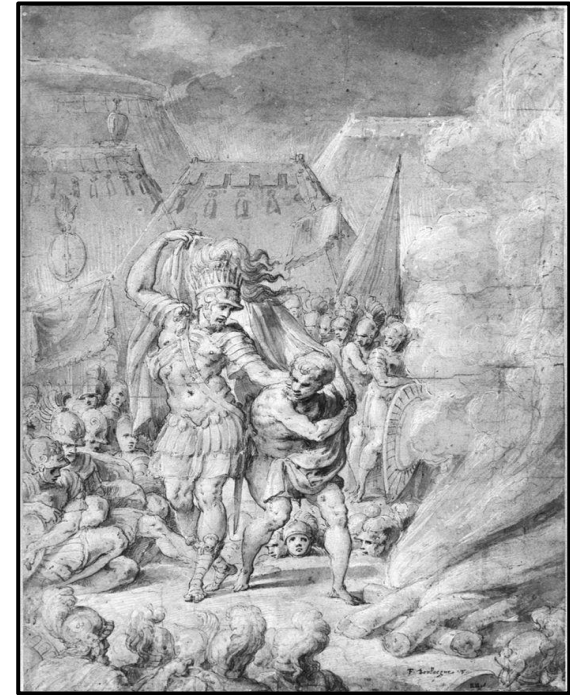


Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology in the Iliad

Article by H.G. Thalmann
Presentation by River Boyer

Thersites Scene

- In Book 2, Agamemnon receives a dream from Zeus, stating that now is the time to arm the Greek troops and take Troy (Iliad 27-43)
- Agamemnon tells the war council about his dream and states his intention to test the will of the Greek troops by ordering them to return home (Iliad 67-94)
- Agamemnon gives his speech to the Greeks, stating that Zeus told him they must return home in dishonor, because they cannot defeat the Trojans (Iliad 133-168)
- The troops take Agamemnon's speech at face value and start rushing towards the ships, longing to go home (Iliad 169-181)



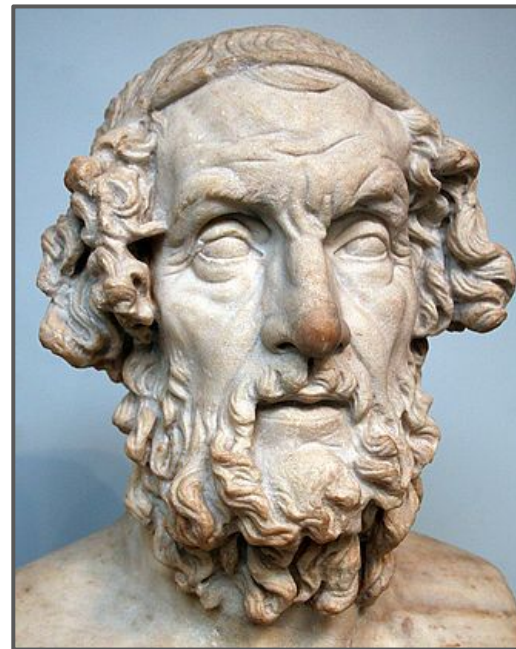
Ulysses chiding Thersites, by
Niccolò dell'Abate (ca. 1509-1571)

Thersites Scene cont.

- Odysseus intervenes, taking Agamemnon's sceptre from him, he manages to control the crowd and get the Greeks to return to the meeting place (Iliad 216-250)
- The text states that the Greek troops were enraged; with an unclear subject of that rage, Thalmann argues it was most likely Agamemnon (Iliad 267)
- Thersites appears receiving a detailed explanation of his ugliness and deformity, he 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 ready to keep fighting the Trojans (Iliad 330-337)

Interpreting the Thersites Scene

- When Thersites is beaten by Odysseus, the prevailing scholarly view interprets the scene as reinforcement and representation of a class ideology
- These scholars also argue that Homer and the contemporary audience would've been in support of this class ideology
- Thalmann's paper takes contention with this interpretation, and attempts to highlight the complexities of the scene that challenge it
- More broadly, Thalmann attempts to analyze the relationship between *The Iliad*, and the conditions and ideology it was created in

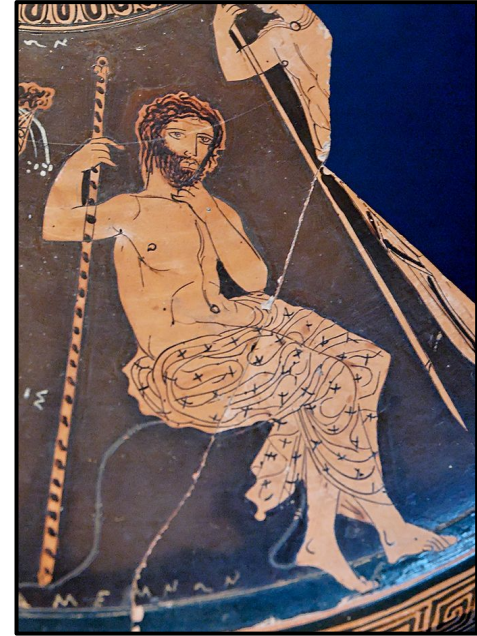


Marble terminal bust of Homer,
Roman replica (2nd Century BCE)

Narrative Complexity: Authority

Thalmann points out several ways in which this scene calls authority into question

- 1) Zeus directly deceives Agamemnon, who is supposed to be his chosen human leader
- 2) Agamemnon takes his dream at face value, despite its unbelievability
- 3) Agamemnon's test to the Greeks backfires, and he's seemingly frozen once they start running to the ships
- 4) Agamemnon's failure almost ruins Zeus' entire plan for the war
- 5) Odysseus takes Agamemnon's sceptre and controls the crowd
- 6) Only Thersites is capable of relieving tensions between the elites and the common troops



Agamemnon seated on a rock and holding his sceptre, Meidias Painter (410–400 BC)

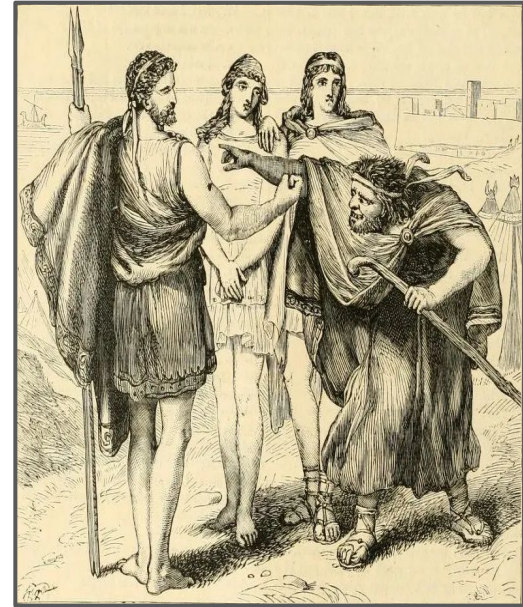
Comedy and Appearance

Next, Thalmann focuses on Thersites' role as a comedic figure

- 1) Thalmann argues that Thersites' exaggerated representation of the common soldiers, creates a parodic distance between Thersites and the troops, this distance allows for the common soldier to laugh at Thersites' beating and resolve tension
- 2) Thalmann argues there's a parodic distance between the text and the audience, revealing the world of *The Iliad* from the bottom and revealing that it's too complex to be represented by the words and actions of heroes

What about Thersites' appearance?

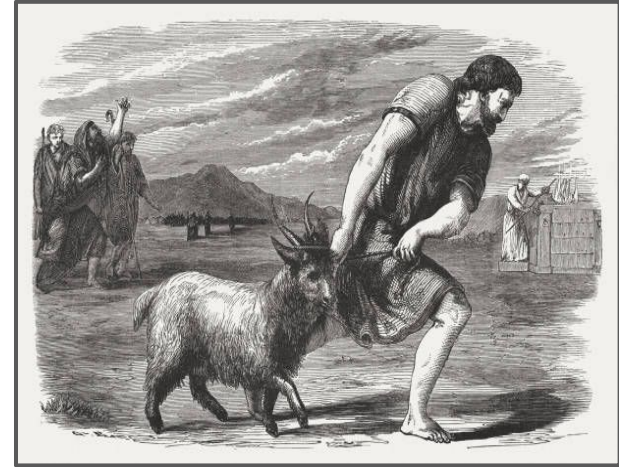
- Scholars point to Thersites' harsh physical description as evidence of judgement from Homer, this follows from the association between beauty and heroism
- However, Thalmann argues that the narrative of the Thersites scene undercuts this by showing Agamemnon, a handsome and powerful man, acting poorly



Thersites accosts Achilles, illustration for Shakespeare's 'Troilus & Cressida', by H. C. Selous (1886)

Thersites as a Scapegoat

- Thersites is scapegoated for the tension between the Greek troops and elites
- Similarly, Achilles is scapegoated (Briseis taken) for the plague situation; both situations exemplify a collective problem being displaced by violence against an individual
- Thalmann argues Thersites is a comedic scapegoat, and Achilles is a tragic scapegoat
- Another comedic scapegoat is Hephaestus, who parallels Thersites in Book 1 when his deformity makes the gods laugh, relieving tension over Zeus and Hera's feud
- Overall, scapegoats function within and serve the ideology, highlighting how violence reinforces the ideology



The goat buck as a sin offering, no referenced artist (18th century)

Scapegoat: one that bears the blame for others (Merriam Webster 2a)

Thalmann's Conclusions

- The Thersites scene presents a class ideology, a challenge to that ideology, and a solution to that challenge; but it also presents a narrative that undercuts that ideology
- However, direct or indirect, Thalmann argues that the Thersites scene likely bore some relation to social issues of Homer's time, but that there's insufficient evidence to show what Homer or the audience believed in
- As a result, Thalmann emphasizes the importance of separating the attitude of the characters within the story and Homer or contemporary audience
- After all, evidence suggests that Homer's era was one of shifting political and cultural values, where the idea of kingship was under question
- Ultimately, Thalmann argues that *The Iliad* should not be seen as neutral on social structure, or a weapon of the ruling class, but as a complex text steeped in ideology, reflecting a complex, and changing society

Sources

[Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology](#)

[Wikipedia Thersites](#)

[Ulysses chiding Thersites](#)

[Homer Marble Bust](#)

[Thersites accosts Achilles](#)

[Lekanis Agamemnon](#)

[Scapegoat Image](#)

[Scapegoat definition](#)

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