

THE LANGUAGE OF ACHILLES

IN a brief article under the present title,¹ Adam Parry raised a simple but profound question: were there certain things that the inherited vocabulary of oral poets did not allow them to say? The mere raising of this question, whatever his answer, is enough to make the article one of the more important contributions to Homeric studies in the last fifty years. As it happens, his answer was affirmative, and it has not been contested. Contested it will now be.

Parry offers two illustrations of what Homer was unable to say, and the first is this. At the end of *Iliad* 8 the Achaeans are hard pressed, and the fires that the Trojans light on the battlefield strike terror into their hearts (8. 553-9. 8). For these fires Homer uses a beautiful simile (555-61):

ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ ἄστρα φαεινὴν ἀμφὶ σελήνην
φαίνεται ἀριπρεπέα, ὅτε τ' ἐπλετο νήνεμος αἰθήρ·
ἐκ τ' ἔφανε πᾶσαι σκοπιαί καὶ πρόωνες ἄκροι
καὶ νάπαι· οὐρανόθεν δ' ἄρ' ὑπερράγῃ ἄσπετος αἰθήρ,
πάντα δὲ εἶδεται ἄστρα, γέγηθε δέ τε φρένα ποιμήν·
τόσσα μεσηγνὺ νέων ἦδ' ἐξάνθοιο ῥοάων
Τρώων καίοντων πυρὰ φαίνεταιο Ἰλίοθι πρό. 559

One detail of this simile, γέγηθε δέ τε φρένα ποιμήν (559), is at variance with the mood of the Achaeans in 9. 1-8 (cf. also 76-7 δῆμοι ἐγγύθι νηῶν καίουσιν πυρὰ πολλά· τίς ἂν τάδε γηθήσει;), and so Parry maintains that the traditional vocabulary, lacking a gloomy simile appropriate to a large number of fires, prevented Homer from bringing the simile and the narrative into harmony.² If he did not want to bring them into harmony, however, it is improper to speak of prevention; and as the only evidence of what he wanted to do is what he did, there is no reason for supposing that he wanted to do anything of the sort. On the contrary, by including 559, which he could perfectly well have omitted, he shows that nothing was further from his mind. Parry must therefore stop short at a conclusion that few people would wish to dispute:³ Homer elaborates his similes without regard to the narrative.

Paradoxically enough, Parry's second and more interesting illustration of what Homer was unable to say is something that he actually said. The paradox and its resolution are concisely stated in Parry's own words. 'Achilles has no language with which to express his disillusionment. Yet he expresses it, and in a remarkable way. He does it by misusing the language he disposes of.'⁴

Where in the speech of Achilles, *Iliad* 9. 308-429, are these misuses to be found?⁵ He asks questions that cannot be answered and makes demands that

¹ *T.A.P.A.* lxxxvii (1956), 1-7, reprinted in *The Language and Background of Homer*, ed. Kirk (Cambridge, 1964), 48-54.

² P. 2 = 49.

³ One of the few is H. Fränkel in *Die homerischen Gleichnisse* (Göttingen, 1921), a work vigorously and justly assailed by Jachmann, *Der homerische Schiffskatalog und die Ilias* (Cologne, 1958), 221-3, 267-338. Incidentally, Fränkel's view of γέγηθε δέ τε

φρένα ποιμήν, more plausible of its kind than Parry's, is that it reflects the mood of the Trojans (p. 34).

⁴ P. 6 = 53.

⁵ Parry extends his argument to 16. 49-100 and 22. 378-94 (p. 7 = 54), but the contradictions he sees in both passages, so far as they are there at all, arise from the unusual sentiments expressed in 9. 308-429.

cannot be met'; one such question is 337-8: *τί δὲ δεῖ πολεμιζέμεναι Τρώεσιν Ἀργείους*; and one such demand is 387: *πρίν γ' ἀπὸ πάσαν ἐμοὶ δόμεναι θυμαλγέα λώβην*.¹ Now neither an unanswerable question nor an impossible demand is by its nature a misuse of language in the sense that Parry's argument requires, a misuse, that is, of traditional vocabulary; and if it is a contingent fact that such misuses occur in this particular question and this particular demand, then Parry ought to have explained where they lie. As regards the question, there can be no explanation, because there is no misuse.² The demand does involve a misuse, but not one that helps Parry's case. In order to show this, it is necessary to examine the argumentation of the speech, which Parry forbore to do.

Achilles begins by saying that he will not change his mind, because instead of being fairly rewarded for his efforts he has been robbed of Briseis, who matters just as much to him as Helen to the Atidae (308-43).³ That being so, Agamemnon will have to manage without him, and he will go home taking what he has; Briseis he cannot take, because Agamemnon has her; so let the impudent villain know that he has seen the last of his help from Achilles (344-77). As for his gifts, all the compensation in the world shall not avail him *πρίν γ' ἀπὸ πάσαν ἐμοὶ δόμεναι θυμαλγέα λώβην*, and no daughter of his, be she a very Aphrodite or Athena, shall have preference over a princess at home (367-97). In fact, says Achilles, I am minded to stay at home with a wife and enjoy my inheritance, for the spoils of war are not worth a man's life, which once lost is lost for ever; and I know from my mother that I must either die a glorious death at Troy or live an inglorious but long life at home (398-416). Indeed, I should advise everyone to go home, because Troy will not be captured (417-20). My reply to the chieftains, then, is this: they may turn where they can for salvation, but not to me (421-6).

At no point in this great speech is the thread of the argument broken. It is only at 378, however, that the argument begins to meet the needs of the situation. Before 378, Achilles dwells on the loss of Briseis, and it seems unreasonable of him to do so, because Agamemnon is at this moment offering to restore her with abundant compensation. The fact is that the poet has trapped himself in a tight corner. If Agamemnon is to make an offer, the plot dictates that Achilles must reject it; if he is to reject it, he must have good reasons for rejecting it. What reasons can be devised? If Achilles turns up his nose at ten or twenty times the figure that Agamemnon first thinks of, the ambassadors will be back offering thirty or forty times. To cut the ground from under their feet, he must altogether discountenance the idea of material compensation; and that is what

¹ P. 6 = 53.

² True as it is that neither *δεῖ* nor *πολεμιζέμεναι* occurs elsewhere in Homer, Parry's argument would have been much too sweeping if he had maintained that every unparalleled phrase is a misuse of traditional language, for he would have found himself drawing wide conclusions from lines like *Θερσίτης δ' ἐπὶ μῶνος ἀμετροεπῆς ἐκόλωα*.

³ Parry himself admits that the question *τί δὲ δεῖ πολεμιζέμεναι Τρώεσιν Ἀργείους*; in 337-8 is answered by Achilles in 339: *ἢ οὐχ' Ἑλένης ἔνεκ' ἠυκόμοιο*; (p. 6 = 53 n. 12). He regards it as unanswerable

because 'it seems, as we read the speech, of wider scope than the answer given. We feel that the justification of war itself is being called in question'. If that is our feeling, we have lost the thread of the argument. The scholia unravel it satisfactorily: *πρακτικὸς ὁ λόγος, δεικνὺς τὸν Ἀγαμέμνονα ἢ ἀσύνητον ἢ ἀδικον· εἰ μὲν γὰρ μικρὸν ἤγειται τὸ ἀδικηθῆναι περὶ γυναῖκα, πολεμεῖν οὐκ ἔδει περὶ Ἑλένης· ἀσύνητος οὖν ἐστὶ περὶ μικρὰς αἰτίας πολέμων· εἰ δὲ χαλεπὸν καὶ μέγα, πῶς ἄπερ παθῶν ὑπ' ἄλλοφύλων ἀγανακτεῖ, ταῦτα εἰς τοὺς φίλους ποῶν οὐκ ἀδικεῖν νομίζει*;

he does when he demands that Agamemnon should 'pay back all his grievous injury' (387). Since grievous injuries cannot be paid back by the person who inflicted them, the demand is an absurdity amounting to 'undo what you did'; but Homer meant it to be absurd, because the only form of compensation that Achilles can dream of accepting is a form that Agamemnon is logically incapable of offering. The absurdity passes because it is close enough to an expression that would not be absurd, 'before he pays me back *for* all my grievous injury'; the reason why Homer did not use this expression is that Agamemnon is offering to do precisely that.

If, then, a logical absurdity is a misuse of language, Parry is right in thinking that 387 involves a misuse of language; and if it can be assumed that the traditional vocabulary of oral epic enshrined no illogicalities, it follows that 387 is a misuse of traditional vocabulary.¹ Well and good; but where in 378-97 is Achilles expressing the disillusionment that strikes Parry as fundamental to the speech and perhaps to the poem?² Far from renouncing heroic ideals, he is setting an absurdly high value on his honour.³

The disillusionment is introduced in 398-416. It develops naturally out of 393-7, but with suitable changes of emphasis in 393-7 the argument could have moved straight on to 417-20.⁴ Had it done so, the speech would have met the needs of the situation equally well, but half the poetry of it would have been absent. No one will disagree with Parry about that. About misuses of language in 398-416, however, Parry says not a word.

The important part of Parry's article is the contention that oral poets were committed by their vocabulary to a particular set of values. That his two arguments for this contention are invalid does not entail that it is false, but the language of Achilles in *Iliad* 9. 308-429 says much for its falsity and nothing for its truth.

Exeter College, Oxford

M. D. REEVE

¹ In structure it is quite the opposite: cf. 1. 98: *πρὶν γ' ἀπὸ πατρὸς φίλῳ δόμεναι ἑλικώπιδα κούρην*.

² 'I will not here discuss Achilles' speech in any detail. But few readers of it, I believe, would disagree that it is about . . . a cleavage between seeming and being. . . . The disillusionment consequent on Achilles' awareness of the cleavage, the questions his awareness of it gives rise to, and the results of all this in the events of the war, are possibly the real plot of the second half of the *Iliad*' (p. 6 = 53).

³ In the whole of 308-97, two passages alone could be thought to reveal a general disillusionment: 337-8 *τί δέ δει πολεμίζεσθαι Τρώεσσι Ἀργείους*;, which needs to be read in context (cf. above, p. 194 n. 3), and 320 *κάθ' ἂν ὁμῶς ὁ τ' ἀεργὸς ἀνὴρ ὁ τε*

πολλὰ ἔοργός, which is indeed out of place. In 321-36 Achilles is levelling a specific charge at Agamemnon, and it is unnecessary to put a general interpretation on 316-17: *οὐκ ἄρα τις χάρις ἦεν μάρνασθαι δηϊόειν ἐπ' ἀνδράσι νωλεμέσ' αἰεὶ* (cf. 17. 147-8). Of the three epigrammatic lines that follow, 318 and 319 are consistent with a specific charge, but 320 is not, and it is tempting to suppose either that the first two attracted the third or that the context attracted all three (certainly the sense runs on smoothly from 317 to 321). Be that as it may, 320 is no more responsible than 337-8 for the misuse of language in 387, which belongs to a different stage of the argument.

⁴ It would be another thing to say that 398-416 were not originally composed for the present context.