

A RESIDUAL PROBLEM IN *ILIAD* 24

The late Colin Macleod's commentary on *Iliad* 24 (Cambridge, 1982) has rightly received praise for its sensitivity to the nuances of Homeric language and its appreciation of the entire poem as a carefully constructed work of art. Although reluctant to accept the more radical solutions proposed by the 'oral' school, Macleod showed himself fully aware of the contribution made by the oral theory towards elucidating the history of the epic. Nevertheless, his commentary is concerned principally with the *Iliad* as we have it: a poem which is at one level a masterly re-telling of saga but at another a sublime tragedy, commiserating the sorrows inseparable from human existence and holding up for our admiration the heroes who nobly confront pain and death. I believe that much, and probably most, of the *Iliad* can and should be viewed in this light. The last book of all, as Macleod himself has shown, offers especially rich rewards to an interpreter who keeps in the front of his mind the overriding aims of the great poet. Yet Macleod's method, like any other single method, will never yield a fully satisfactory answer on all occasions. However the 'definitive' or 'monumental' composition of the *Iliad* was brought about, it formed only one stage (though from our point of view incomparably the most important stage) in the development of the Greek epic. Our *Iliad* cannot have been the first or the only treatment, on a large scale, of the matter of Troy. Other attempts to recount parts of the saga had assuredly been made before the master-poet started work. We cannot tell how many versions he knew, or how many he adopted or discarded in the course of his long work of construction. The theoretical possibility is strong that not all inconsistencies have been ironed out; and our *Iliad* may be found to contain material alien to its present context – material, that is to say, originally intended for another version of the narrative which has been used in the present version, despite its inappropriateness.¹

One passage in *Iliad* 24, among others, draws the reader up short. It cannot be interpreted convincingly according to the methods applied by Macleod; and in his treatment of it he carries less than his usual conviction.

The scene between Priam and Achilles is coming to a close:

τὸν δ' ἐπικερτομέων προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς·
 Ἐκτὸς μὲν δὴ λέξο, γέρον φίλε, μὴ τις Ἀχαιῶν
 ἐνθάδ' ἐπέλθῃσιν βουληφόρος, οἳ τέ μοι αἰεὶ
 βουλὰς βουλεύουσι παρήμενοι, ἣ θέμις ἐστί·
 τῶν εἴ τίς σε ἴδοιτο θοὴν διὰ νύκτα μέλαιναν,
 αὐτίκ' ἂν ἐξείποι Ἀγαμέμνονι ποιμένι λαῶν,
 καὶ κεν ἀνάβλησις λύσιος νεκροῦ γένηται (24.649–55).

Achilles requests the old king to spend the night in the portico, in case his presence comes to the notice of Agamemnon, who might cause delay in the release of Hector's body. Hermes later (686–8) gives somewhat different reasons for avoiding the notice of Agamemnon.

¹ I continue to speak of 'versions' in spite of the dogmatism of certain extremists. For example we read: 'when we are dealing with the traditional poetry of the Homeric (and Hesiodic) compositions, it is not justifiable to claim that a passage in any text can refer to another passage in another text', G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (1979), 42. The tendentious word is 'text'; of course no one is thinking of a text.

Macleod explains that ἐπικερτομέων at 649 must mean ‘teasing’ or ‘mystifying’, and cites a similar use in 4.6, 13.326, and 24.240 (references to the *Odyssey* are distinguished by bold type for the book numbers). (I think it better not to use in evidence his further parallels from Euripides and Theocritus, while the passage in *Works and Days* 788–9 is inconclusive.) But then it turns out that there is no real deception at all, for as Macleod himself remarks ‘it is quite normal practice to give guests a bed under the αἴθουσα . . . ; and it is hard to see how Priam by sleeping there would escape the notice of night-visitors By making Priam sleep in the αἴθουσα he eases the old man’s departure. But it would be undignified and inhospitable for him to do so more openly; hence the polite deception of these lines’.

Macleod’s handling of the human relationships involved is as sensitive here as it usually is; but I believe that, in attempting to solve one difficulty (the nature of the connexion between ἐπικερτομέων and the following speech), he has raised other problems, to which no obvious or acceptable solution is forthcoming. For the word ἐπικερτομέων cannot in fact convey the notion of ‘deception’ or ‘mystification’ which Macleod wishes to attach to it; and, even if it could, we might still feel disconcerted on being told first that deception was about to be practised and then that no real deception was involved at all. To help make these points clear, it is necessary to glance at the κερτομ- words in Homer, both those which are cited by Macleod and those which are not, and then at the two occurrences of ἐπικερτομέων outside our passage.

- (1) αὐτίκα κερτομοῖσι Δία Κρονίωνα προσήυδα (1.539).

Here has noticed Zeus conversing with Thetis; she is enraged at his deceptive conduct and briskly takes him to task, addressing him κερτομοῖσι (ἐπέεσσιν). Her words lead to Zeus’ uncompromising speech (1.545–50), in which he insists on his right to take decisions apart from the other gods, and even (if need be) apart from her.

- (2) σὺ δὲ κερτομέων ἀγορεύεις (2.256).

Odysseus harshly rebukes Thersites for his ‘anti-heroic’ attitude; κερτομέων is in parallel to ὀνειδίζων in the previous line, and both words refer to the bitter taunts which Thersites has hurled at Agamemnon. The result of these taunts is the beating which Odysseus gives Thersites in 2.265–6.

- (3) αὐτίκ’ ἐπειράτο Κρονίδης ἐρεθίζεμεν Ἥρην
κερτομοῖσι ἐπέεσσιν, παραβλήδην ἀγορεύων (4.5–6).

This passage demands a closer look, since it is one of those mentioned by Macleod as giving evidence of a ‘deceptive’ meaning of the κερτομ- group of words. There can, of course, be no doubt that Zeus is here pursuing his purpose in a devious manner. By raising the possibility of reconciling the Achaeans with the Trojans, he intends to inflame the anger of the pro-Achaean goddesses Athene and Here and so achieve his real aim, the resumption of the general conflict after Menelaus’ hollow victory in 3. And he succeeds in his purpose; his κερτόμια ἔπεια do stir the goddesses to anger (20–9), and as a result of the furious exchanges between Here and Zeus there ensues what he intended all along, the despatch of Athene to begin the battle again (70–2). It is clear that the word παραβλήδην in 6 lends, or may well lend, some additional force to ἀγορεύων of such a nature as to fix the meaning of κερτομοῖσι ἐπέεσσιν. Since παραβλήδην is not found elsewhere in Homer, we have to look for assistance to the passage in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* which is modelled on the beginning of 4:

θεὸς δ’ ὑπὸ καλὸν αἶδεν
ἐξ αὐτοσχεδῆος πευρώμενος ἥυτε κούροι
ἤβηται θάλιησι παραιβόλα κερτομέουσιν (54–6).

The theme is that of Hermes' invention of the lyre and the first songs he sang to its accompaniment: these were (according to Radermacher's convincing interpretation)² like the impudent retorts uttered by young men at festivals. If the parallel with 4.6 holds good (on the assumption that *παραίβολα* is formed after Homeric *παραβλήδην*),³ there is nothing in the use of *παραβλήδην* to indicate 'deceptiveness' or 'mystification'; on the contrary, it is the forwardness of Zeus which is being alluded to.

- (4) αἰ δ' αὖτ' εἰσορόωσαι Ἀθηναίη τε καὶ Ἥρην
κερτομίους ἐπέεσσι Δία Κρονίδην ἐρέθιζον (5.418–19).

This passage forms a kind of mirror-image of No. 3. There Zeus used *κερτόμια ἔπεα* to arouse the anger of Athene and Here, and he succeeded. Now the same two goddesses use *κερτόμια ἔπεα* so that Zeus will dissuade Aphrodite from participating in the battle, and they succeed.

- (5) αὐτίκα δὲ σφήκεσσιν ὅϊκοτες ἐξεχέοντο
εἰνοδίοις, οὓς παῖδες ἐριδμαίνωσιν ἔθοντες,
αἰεὶ κερτομέοντες, ὁδῶ ἐπὶ οἴκῳ ἔχοντας (16.259–61).

Part of the well-known simile in which the Myrmidons are compared to wasps which mischievous boys keep tormenting. The word *κερτομέοντες* repeats the sense of *ἐριδμαίνωσιν*,⁴ much as *κερτομέων* repeats that of *ὀνειδίζων* in No. 2.

- (6) ἐπεὶ σάφα οἶδα καὶ αὐτὸς
ἦμὲν κερτομίας ἦδ' αἴσυλα μυθήσασθαι (20.201–2 = 432–3).

The first time spoken to Achilles by Aeneas, the second time to him by Hector. Aeneas and Hector claim to have no fear of Achilles and to be well able to utter 'both taunts and malicious words',⁵ such as Achilles has just addressed to them.

- (7) ἄμφι δ' Ἀθήνη
πολλὴν ἥερα χεῦε φίλα φρονέουσ' Ὀδυσῆϊ,
μή τις Φαιήκων μεγαθύμων ἀντιβολήσας
κερτομέοι ἐπέεσσι καὶ ἐξέροιθ' ὅτις εἴη (7.14–17).

Athene sheds a mist over Odysseus so that none of the Phaeacians may *κερτομέοι* him *ἐπέεσσι* (as actually happens in the next Book; cf. No. 8), and ask him who he is. This passage does nothing to delimit the meaning of *κερτομέω*, except that it precludes any hint of mystification.

- (8) Λαοδάμα, τί με ταῦτα κελεύετε κερτομέοντες; (8.153).

Odysseus' rejoinder to the insulting words of Laodamas, who has challenged him to display his athletic prowess. Euryalus subsequently makes an even more insulting speech – a speech which Odysseus later (185) admits has proved *θυμοδακής* to him.

- (9) καὶ τότε ἔγῳ Κύκλωπα προσηύδων κερτομίοισι (9.474).

Odysseus tells how he addressed the Cyclops *κερτομίοισι* (*ἐπέεσσι*), the effect of which was to enrage him all the more (*χολώσατο κηρόθι μᾶλλον* 480).

- (10) σὲ δὲ κερτομέουσιν οἶω
ταῦτ' ἀγορευμέναι, ἴν' ἐμὰς φρένας ἡπεροπέυσης (13.326–7).

² L. Radermacher, *Der homerische Hermeshymnus* (1931), 75.

³ O. Zumbach, *Neuerungen in der Sprache der homerischen Hymnen* (1955), 12.

⁴ J. T. Kakridis, *Homer Revisited* (1971), 139.

⁵ There is no need to alter *αἴσυλα* to *αἴσιμα*, as some editors do. So far as I can see, *αἴσυλα* forms a satisfactory antithesis to *κερτομίας*. If *αἴσιμα* is read, it amounts to a 'dignified rebuke' (Leaf); I think we need not a 'dignified rebuke' but the 'quarrelling and wrangling' Aeneas himself mentions (20.251).

Odysseus says to Athene: 'I think you speak these words in mockery, so as to deceive my mind'. Here, of course, deception *is* involved; we observe, however, that this idea is conveyed not by *κερτομέουσαν* but by the final clause *ἵν' ἐμὰς φρένας ἡπεροπεύσῃς*. Thus not even here are we justified in regarding the word *κερτομέω* as itself implying deceit.

- (11) κείσε δ' ἂν οὐ μιν ἐγὼ γε μετὰ μνηστῆρας ἐῷμι
ἐρχεσθαι· λίην γὰρ ἀτάσθαλον ὕβριν ἔχουσι·
μή μιν κερτομέωσιν, ἐμοὶ δ' ἄχος ἔσσεται αἰνόν (16.85–7).

Telemachus expresses his fear that the suitors will *κερτομέωσιν* his father. Of course they are not going to deceive or mystify Odysseus: that is what he will do to them!

- (12) μνηστῆρας δ' οὐ πάμπαν ἀγήνορας εἶα 'Αθήνη
λώβης ἴσχεσθαι θυμαλγέος, ὄφρ' ἔτι μάλλον
δύη ἄχος κραδίην Λαερτιάδεω 'Οδυσῆος.
τοῖσιν δ' Εὐρύμαχος, Πολύβου πάις, ἄρχ' ἀγορεύειν,
κερτομέων 'Οδυσῆα, γέλω δ' ἐτάροισιν ἔτευχε (18.346–50).

What Telemachus envisaged in No. 11 is actually happening. By the agency of Athene, the suitors are acting in such a way as to make *ἄχος* sink into Odysseus' heart. The phrase *δύη ἄχος κραδίην* recalls the *θυμοδακῆς* of 8.185; both here and there the taunts have found their mark.

- (13) αὐτὸς δ' αὐτ' 'Οδυσῆα προσηύδα κερτομίοισι (20.177).

Odysseus makes no immediate reaction to these *κερτόμια* of Melanthius, but ponders them deep in his heart (184).

- (14) κερτομίας δέ τοι αὐτὸς ἐγὼ καὶ χείρας ἀφέξω (20.263).

Telemachus says that he will personally protect Odysseus from the 'insulting words and physical assault' of the suitors.

- (15) μερμήριξε δ' ἔπειτα κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμὸν
κύσσαι καὶ περιφῦναι ἐὸν πατέρ', ἥδ' ἕκαστα
εἰπεῖν, ὥς ἔλθοι καὶ ἵκοιτ' ἐς πατρίδα γαίαν,
ἧ πρῶτ' ἐξερέοιτο ἕκαστά τε πειρήσαιτο.
ὦδε δέ οἱ φρονέοντι δοάσασα κέρδιον εἶναι,
πρῶτον κερτομίους ἐπέεσσιν πειρηθῆναι (24.235–40).

In this passage, the word *κερτομίους* does seem to have a close connexion with the deceptive course of conduct upon which Odysseus is about to embark. We are fortunate that Heubeck has recently devoted a subtle and penetrating paper to the analysis of this and other Homeric *πεῖραι*.⁶ The *κερτόμια* ἔπεα can hardly be 'taunting' or 'mocking' words. The *πεῖρα* on which Odysseus is here engaged is the attempt to break the carapace in which the old man has clothed himself and to bring him back gently and gradually into the world. The *κερτόμια* comprise the means employed by Odysseus to this end; like the *κερτόμια* of 4.6 they are meant to provoke a reaction, and they do. Heubeck seems to me to have solved the problems which many critics have discerned in the Odysseus–Laertes passage; and he has also helped us to a truer understanding of *κερτόμια* and related words in Homer. The meaning they convey is primarily that of *provocation*: a means to an end. In the preponderance of passages analysed above, the *κερτομ-* word indicates the provocation of another person into behaving in a certain way, whether that is the behaviour desired by the speaker (Nos. 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 15) or is not desired by him (Nos. 1, 2, 5, 9, 13).

⁶ A. Heubeck, 'Zwei homerische *πεῖραι* (24.205ff. – 2.53ff.)', *Živa Antika* 31 (1981), 73–83.

The number of instances examined is large enough to fix the meaning of Homeric *κερτομ*- words within quite narrow limits and to indicate the circumstances in which they are used. In themselves, they convey no hint of deception, although this is an overtone which may be suggested by the context.

The word *ἐπικερτομένων* is used three times in the Homeric poems:

τὸν δ' ἐπικερτομένων προσέφη, Πατρόκλεες ἵππευ (16.744);
τὸν δ' ἐπικερτομένων προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς (24.649);
τὸν δ' ἐπικερτομένων προσέφη, Εὐμαιε συβώτα (22.194).

These are but three variants ('allomorphs') of a standard expression, which may be applied to the name of a person accompanied by an epithet. In the first and third examples, the situation is similar: Patroclus vaunts his prowess over the enemy he has just killed, and Eumaeus makes mock of *his* enemy, who is about to die in bonds. The idea of 'provocation', which as we saw is uppermost with the simple verb, seems to be lost entirely when the prefix *ἐπι*- is added; and the meaning becomes very close to that of 'taunting'.

Our investigation so far has yielded only negative results. No one, I imagine, will think that 'taunting' gives an appropriate sense in 24.649; and yet we have no right to dilute the meaning of *ἐπικερτομένων* in that line to something like 'good-natured chaffing', seeing that in exactly the same formulaic context in 16 and 22 it is used unmistakably of a victor mocking his defeated enemy. In Leaf's commentary it is accepted that 'taunting' should be the meaning, in accordance with the parallels. 'The application is very obscure', says Leaf, 'but it is best taken as expressing Achilles' tone in speaking of Agamemnon, as though he bitterly assumed that his enemy would thwart him at every opportunity. There is no taunt in his words to Priam'. But either *ἐπικερτομένων* means 'taunting' someone actually present, or it does not; the formula cannot in two places convey the 'taunt' to a defeated enemy before the speaker's face, and in the third express, not a taunt at all, but bitter resentment at an absent rival.

Hence the only acceptable meaning of *ἐπικερτομένων*, that of 'taunting', cannot be made to fit the context in 24.649. And the primary meaning of the simple verb, 'provoking', is not present either; if Achilles intends to induce Priam to act in a way not previously contemplated, that fact is not made clear, for (as Macleod himself points out) it was actually the normal custom for guests to sleep in the portico. Finally, it has to be said that Macleod's own suggestion of 'mystifying' represents a desperate attempt to give the word *some* significant meaning: the stem *κερτομ*- by itself never elsewhere conveys the sense of 'mystification'; and the context here does not for a moment suggest it as an appropriate rendering.

We are thus confronted by several interlocking problems. In the first place, Achilles has been moved to profound pity by Priam's grief, and his sympathy takes a practical form; not only does he arrange, in the most tactful possible way, for the washing and preparation of Hector's body (in discussing this topic, Macleod shows himself at his very best as an interpreter), but he actually asks Priam how long an interval is requisite for the conduct of the funeral. In the second place, still taking thought for Priam's welfare, Achilles orders a bed to be made up for him in the portico. But in the third place Achilles' speech is introduced by a formula expressive of mocking contempt, completely alien to the goodwill he shows towards Priam; and in the fourth and last place his explanation of Priam's sleeping-arrangements is both gratuitous (since a guest would *expect* to sleep in the portico) and futile (since the portico is the very place in which a guest could be sure of being seen by any visitor).

When we meet a formulaic line (649) which is at odds with its surroundings and

which does not even cohere with the ensuing words of Achilles, and when those words in their turn fail to explain satisfactorily the proposal for Priam to sleep in the portico, we see once more the signs of 'imperfect adaptation'. It is easy enough to envisage a situation during the combats of Books 20–22 in which Achilles did utter taunts over a defeated enemy: taunts which our line 24.649 would have expressed forcefully. The trouble is that Priam is not Achilles' defeated enemy, and Achilles has no thought of mocking him. It is easy too to envisage an *Iliad* in which the old resentment between Achilles and Agamemnon continues to smoulder until the very end of the poem; but such is not our *Iliad*. When Achilles says *νῦν δ' ἤτοι μὲν ἐγὼ παύω χόλον* (19.67), that is not with him a mere form of words: from that moment, he feels no distrust towards Agamemnon, and even shows him marked respect in the Games (23.890–4). Hence Achilles' fear of intervention by Agamemnon (24.654–5) does not provide a credible motif for setting the bed in the portico. Nevertheless, the economy of the poem we have demands that Priam sleep there, whether or not it is the accustomed place for guests, and whatever reason may be advanced in the present case: Priam simply must be in the portico, so that he can easily slip away when Hermes comes to guide him home. Priam must sleep in the portico; but the reason given for his doing so arises not from the circumstances of our poem but from those of a different version, which preserves to its end the traces of Achilles' animus against Agamemnon.

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