

THERSITES: COMEDY, SCAPEGOATS, AND HEROIC IDEOLOGY IN THE *ILIAD*

W. G. THALMANN

University of Southern California

As "the ugliest man who came beneath Ilium," who is given neither a patronymic nor a place of origin, Thersites is evidently a common soldier—the only one individually described in the *Iliad*—and is the absolute antithesis of the handsome, strong, and brave "Homeric Hero."¹ When, in Book 2, he upbraids Agamemnon and Odysseus beats him into submission with a royal sceptre descended from Zeus, it is easy to read the episode as reinforcing a class ideology common to the poet, his characters, and his audience. And that is the usual interpretation. The majority of critics who bother with the scene, in fact, divide into two groups, not because of disagreement on its import, but only according to their response to this single reading of it. Some unreflectingly pass the same judgment that they think the text implies: Thersites forgets his place and suffers what he deserves.² Others, though assuming that Homer's contemporaries would have taken this view, respond from their own different cultural and political perspective, with more distance and often some degree of disapproval.³ These

¹ Cf. Schol. bT on *Il.* 2.212 and G. S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary* Vol. 1 (Cambridge 1985) 138–39 (on 2.212). Like some others, Kirk doubts that Thersites is a common soldier because of the latter's claims for himself in his speech against Agamemnon and because a man of that rank would not be allowed to speak in the assembly. But there is no reason to take so credulously assertions made in a speech that the narrative implies will be "laughable" (2.215), and the "inappropriateness" of a commoner speaking in the assembly is, I shall argue, an important part of the episode. Cf. Odysseus' sarcasm on Thersites as a speaker (2.246).

² E.g., Karl Reinhardt, *Die Ilias und ihr Dichter* (Göttingen 1961) 112–15. For other examples, see note 31 below.

³ E.g., George Grote, *A History of Greece* (new ed., London 1888) Vol. II, p. 12: "The second book of the *Iliad*...presents a repulsive picture of the degradation of the mass of the people before the chiefs"; *ibid.*, p. 14: "...The unpopularity of such a character [as Thersites] is attested even more by the excessive pains which Homer takes to heap upon him repulsive personal deformities, than by the chastisement of Odysseus"; J. P. Mahaffy, *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* (London 1907) 13: "The figure of Thersites seems drawn with special spite and venom, as a satire upon the first critics that rose up among the people, and questioned the divine right of kings to do wrong." For a history of responses to Thersites, see H. D. Rankin, "Thersites the Malcontent, A Discussion," *SO* 47 (1972) 36–38, 41–42. The Thersites episode has also drawn the attention of Analysts and Neo-Analysts: for the former, see P. von der Mühl, "Die Diapaira im B der Ilias," *MH* 3 (1946) 197–209, and F. Lämmli, "Ilias B: Meuterei oder Versuchung?" *MH* 5 (1948) 83–95; for the latter, W. Kullman, "Die Probe des

judgments and the reading on which they are based beg considerable questions about the relation of a literary text to the conditions and ideologies of the society in which it is produced, and about the complicity, in what may seem the prevailing ideology within the narrative, of original audience and modern reader (or at least the former).

G. E. M. de Ste. Croix offers an example of the conventional interpretation that reflects with particular clarity the assumptions and reasoning on which it is based:

But Homer is not at all on his [Thersites'] side; he represents the bulk of the army (*he plethus*, line 278) as disapproving strongly of his seditious speech and as breaking into applause and laughter when the great Odysseus thumps him on the back and shoulders with his golden sceptre and makes him subside weeping into his seat (lines 265–78). And Homer has carefully caricatured this proto-demagogue...I might add that the aristocratic society for which the Homeric poems were composed would have regarded Odysseus' brutal treatment of Thersites as perfectly right and proper, and characteristic of a great man. A little earlier in the same book of the *Iliad* (II.188–206) we find the same hero's courteous behavior to chieftains and leading men contrasted with his violence and contumely towards commoners ('men of the *demos*') who ventured to take independent action; such men he bludgeoned and abused, admonishing them to shut up and defer to their betters. The speech Homer gives him ends with the famous words, 'A multitude of chieftains is no good thing; let there be one lord, one ruler' (lines 204–5).⁴

There may be some validity in this reading; but what justifies such an easy passage from the applause of the Achaean army to the attitudes of Homer and his listeners? Certainly the description of Thersites is unflattering, but as we shall see it does not necessarily reflect the poet's own class prejudices or his appeal to the bias of his audience. It is also undeniable, and important, that the result of the episode is the soldiers' enthusiasm for staying at Troy and continuing the war: authority and its accompanying ideology have been reinforced—for them. But surely we should distinguish between the audience's perspective on events and that of the characters within the narrative. And finally, who was this audience? It is not at all certain that Homer composed purely for aristocrats, that he was a "court poet," or that the Homeric poems can fairly be

Achaierheeres in der Ilias," *MH* 12 (1955) 253–73 and J. Ebert, "Die Gestalt des Thersites in der Ilias," *Philologus* 113 (1969) 159–75. I do not agree with the methods and assumptions of either school, but these critics' close reading of the text is helpful. For another, unusual view of Thersites (with which I cannot agree), see A. Feldman, "The Apotheosis of Thersites," *CJ* 42 (1947) 219–21. For a brief treatment of Thersites that implies a reading much like my own, see Frederick Ahl, "The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome," *AJP* 105 (1984) 174–75. Cf. also G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge 1962) 382–83.

⁴ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca 1981) 413; cf. p. 279.

called "aristocratic epic."⁵ Although there is little evidence either way, it is likely that the audience at one time or another consisted of people from *all* levels of society.⁶ If that society was aristocratic (as de Ste. Croix reasonably assumes) with a dominant (aristocratic) ideology, it need not have been homogeneous. There seem, in fact, to have been strains and conflicts within it, and we cannot take it for granted that Homeric epic, like Odysseus with the sceptre, repressed them.

It is best to postpone questions of the poem's historical context and its original audience's response until the end of this paper, after consideration of the Thersites scene. As to the structure of the society depicted within the *Iliad*, views differ.⁷ I take it as legitimate to speak of a division between the common

⁵ M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (rev. ed., New York 1978) 106.

⁶ Kirk (above, note 3, 274–81) has suggested that the *Iliad* was composed for popular audiences. Cf. W. G. Thalmann, *Conventions of Form and Thought in Early Greek Epic Poetry* (Baltimore 1984) 119–20.

⁷ On this question I have found most useful G. M. Calhoun, "Classes and Masses in Homer," *CP* 29 (1934) 192–208, 301–16; Hermann Strasburger, "Der soziologische Aspekt der homerischen Epen," *Gymnasium* 60 (1953) 97–114; W. G. Forrest, *The Emergence of Greek Democracy 800–400 B.C.* (New York and Toronto 1966) 45–58; Juri V. Andreev, "Volk und Adel bei Homer," *Klio* 57 (1975) 281–91; M. I. Finley (above, note 5) especially 53–54, 82–84. Calhoun denies the existence in Homer of a hereditary aristocracy and of clearly defined social classes. He speaks instead of status based on individual qualities and of "a society in which each *polis* is dominated by an indeterminate number of petty kings whose immediate families partake of their eminence" (p. 308). Even on his showing, there would be a distinction between low and high (which is all that we need here), buttressed by an ideology: "...the members of kingly families are assumed to be, not evil, or cowardly, or weak, or ugly, but good, brave, strong, and beautiful" (p. 204). These words suggest, in fact, that it may be wrong to distinguish between birth and personal qualities, which instead, according to this ideology, would form a closed circle, each implying the other. Moreover, Calhoun seems to underrate the importance of birth in Homeric society. He does not deal convincingly (p. 204) with the phrase γένος γε κακὸν καὶ ἀνάγκη at *Il.* 14.126 or with its context. And he overlooks the way the heroic standards form a tradition transmitted within families; they are *learned*, and one can bring glory or disgrace on one's ancestors (*Il.* 6.209–10, 444–46). We should also note the careful preservation in memory of the father's advice on sending his son off to battle (*Il.* 6.208–20, 9.252–59, 11.765–90). (These arguments seem necessary because Calhoun's position has recently been taken up by A. G. Geddes, "Who's Who in 'Homeric' Society?" *CQ* 34 [1984] 17–36). Calhoun gives an excellent short description of the Thersites scene, but calls its purpose purely "literary," without any social or political significance; this distinction seems questionable. The other writers cited here describe, more plausibly, an aristocratic society—Forrest perhaps does the most justice to its complexity and informality—and see the Thersites scene as reinforcing an aristocratic outlook. A different and helpful perspective on the upper level of Homeric society is given by Walter Donlan, "The Structure of Authority in the *Iliad*," *Arethusa* 12 (1979) 51–70. Donlan views the Thersites episode (p. 60) as part of a process of restoring collective authority after the conflict in Book 1

people (themselves probably with several sub-groups such as peasants and artisans) and above them either kings (*basileis*) or, more likely, a king and an aristocracy. This distinction is the essential point for our purposes, and we shall be concerned here with one aspect of the relation between these groups: the dominance of one over the other. "Classes," an "aristocracy," and so forth may not have existed quite as we conceive them, but such terms are applicable, if only loosely, and even though the society's functioning was probably complex and relatively informal. It may be helpful to refer to Forrest's image of this society as a series of pyramids with a "noble" at the apex of each and various people below in varying degrees of dependence on him. Those at the tops of the various pyramids would be politically active and would function as military leaders in war. They would be conscious of themselves as members of a cohesive group defined by shared values and standards of conduct. Their wealth lay primarily in livestock (cf. *Od.* 14.96–104) and land (at least some would enjoy a particularly choice plot carved out of the available land, a *temenos*).⁸ It is this "horizontal" group, cutting across the "verticality" of the "pyramids," that I am calling the "aristocracy." Below this group might have come smaller land-holders with their households, and at the bottom would be the free men and slaves who worked for those who held the land. Doubtless these differences—between those who worked for others and those who possessed land, and, within the latter group, in size of land-holdings—determined class distinctions.⁹

In many instances, the interests of all social ranks will have coincided—or could be made to appear to coincide through the ideology that justified one

between claims to authority based on position (Agamemnon) and standing (Achilles). This seems accurate, though it neutralizes the working of ideology in the scene.

⁸ On the *temenos*, see pp. 224–30 of M. I. Finley, "Homer and Mycenae: Property and Tenure" in *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* (New York 1982) 213–32. I would draw attention especially to the scene of reaping on the royal *temenos* on the shield of Achilles (*Il.* 18.550–60), which shows the *basileus* making use of others' labor (and perhaps different meals being prepared for the king and the workers, the former getting meat, the latter barley).

⁹ Cf. Finley (above, note 5) 59–60. The definitions by de Ste. Croix (above, note 4, 43–44) might apply to Homer, if only approximately: "*Class* (essentially a relationship) is the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation...*A class*...is a group of persons in a community identified by their position in the whole system of social production, defined above all according to their relationship (primarily in terms of the degree of ownership or control) to the means of production (that is to say, the means and labour of production) and to other classes...It is of the essence of a *class society* that one or more of the smaller classes, in virtue of their control over the conditions of production...will be able to exploit—that is, to appropriate a surplus at the expense of—the larger classes, and thus constitute an economically and socially (and therefore probably also politically) superior class or classes." The difficulty is that we know too little about "modes of production" in Homeric society to apply such concepts systematically. That is why, in the text, I have stayed with description rather than rigorous definition.

class's dominance over another.¹⁰ The famous speech of Sarpedon to Glaucus (12.310–28) not only testifies to the kind of class difference described above, but also offers an ideological explanation of it. Why, asks Sarpedon, are he and Glaucus provided with the best of food and possessions—a *temenos* and seats of honor, choice meat, and full cups at feasts? In return, he feels obliged to fight in the front ranks of battle; from his point of view, the *basileis* justify their maintenance by fighting in the community's interests. Alongside this inner sense of obligation, Sarpedon is concerned that the common people should say,

οὐ μὰν ἀκλῆες Λυκίην κάτα κοιρανέουσιν
 ἡμέτεροι βασιλῆες, ἔδουσί τε πίονα μῆλα
 οἶνόν τ' ἔξαιτον μελιθόα· ἀλλ' ἄρα καὶ ἴς
 ἐσθλή, ἐπεὶ Λυκίοισι μέτα πρώτοισι μάχονται.

Certainly not without glory do our kings [*basileis*]
 rule in Lycia and consume the rich flocks
 and the choice, honey-sweet wine. But their might
 is noble, since they fight among the foremost Lycians.

Valor in war and the winning of *kleos* are to be viewed by the commoners as a satisfactory return for privileges the kings enjoy at their expense. So far, then, Sarpedon expresses perceptions of an unequal economic and social arrangement on the part of his own class and the lower orders (at least as he represents their perspective). That is, he articulates an ideology.¹¹

Now, however, he takes a new direction. If we were to be immortal and ageless, he tells Glaucus, I would not fight or command you to fight; but since that is not possible, let us go into battle. These lines in effect deny that economic and social relations, as Sarpedon has represented them, are the determin-

¹⁰ A helpful discussion of various senses of "ideology" may be found in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977) 55–71. I take ideology to be a complex of representations of the individual's relation to actual economic and social relations. As a representation, ideology is necessarily a distortion, but since we are all within ideology, I do not mean the term necessarily in a disparaging sense (i.e., merely as "false consciousness"). In a class society there will usually be a prevailing ideological formation that will have the effect of furthering the interests of the dominant class; but there may also be other, competing ideologies. See especially Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (English translation, New York and London 1971) 127–86. Terms such as "class" and "ideology" are especially characteristic of Marxist theory, though of course not limited to it. I am not myself a Marxist, but I have made use of Marxist writers in this paper because I have found in them the most explicit and sustained discussion of these and related matters.

¹¹ This passage is strangely ignored by Calhoun and Geddes (above, note 7). It clearly shows, however, a gap between high and low, and reflection on the reasons for that gap, though of course it says nothing about birth. In the absence of elaborated institutions that would automatically guarantee a man the status that was his by birth, he would, no doubt, have constantly to *prove* his possession of the requisite qualities *in practice*. That is what Homeric heroes in fact perpetually do, and its necessity seems to be what Sarpedon is talking about.

ing reason to fight.¹² They are displaced, without, of course, being abolished, by a metaphysical explanation: the inevitability of death, and the consequent need to die with glory. The implied claim is that the hero ultimately does not risk his life for material rewards (which remain a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for his fighting) but for intangible values. Insofar as this explanation, for Sarpedon himself as well as for his peers, disguises other reasons for fighting, it is ideological. We therefore see the ideological character of the heroic ideal, of which this passage is a key statement.

Another passage will bring out further aspects of that dominant ideology (*Il.* 17.248–51: Menelaus is exhorting the other Achaean leaders to fight):¹³

ὦ φίλοι, Ἀργείων ἡγήτορες ἡδὲ μέδοντες,
οὔτε παρ' Ἀτρεΐδης, Ἀγαμέμνονι καὶ Μενελάῳ,
δήμια πίνουσιν καὶ σημαίνουσιν ἕκαστος
λαοῖς· ἐκ δὲ Διὸς τιμὴ καὶ κῦδος ὀπηδεῖ.

O friends, leaders and councillors of the Argives,
who beside the Atreidae, Agamemnon and Menelaus,
each drink the commons' wine [*demia*] and give orders
to the people. For from Zeus honor and prestige accompany you.

Here again are implied the reciprocal obligations of aristocrats and the larger community. But now the authority of these leaders is stressed, and the phrase δῆμια πίνουσιν implies, more pointedly than Sarpedon's language, that they enjoy the products of the lower class's work. Another aspect of their position is also given (if δέ in line 251 is explanatory, this would additionally justify their privileges): their standing and prestige descend from Zeus, and so are made to seem part of the order of the world. This ideological "naturalizing" of the social structure stamps it with an inevitable rightness as part of "the way things are."¹⁴

This ideology would thus work in favor of the stability of the social order by making each person's position within the class structure seem appropriate. But it can also become the scene of conflict between competing interests when that order is subjected to stress. That, I would argue, is what happens in Agamemnon's test of the army and the Thersites scene in which it culminates. I think, then, that the conventional, univocal reading of the Thersites scene is reductively simple. By exploring the scene's complexities, I hope to raise questions about the role of class divisions, ideology, and violence within the society portrayed in the *Iliad*. Such questions, indeed, seem inevitable once we attend

¹² See the subtle analysis of this speech by David Claus on pp. 21–23 of "Aidos in the Language of Achilles," *TAPA* 105 (1975) 13–28. The effect is the same whether the second part of the speech is taken as devaluing or as setting more value on the rewards enjoyed by the hero, as Claus' discussion makes clear. See also James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago 1975) 100–101.

¹³ This passage was selected because it is used by Calhoun (above, note 7, 305–306) in support of his argument and is thus a good test of my own.

¹⁴ It is, therefore, a form of the "recognition function" of ideology discussed by Althusser (above, note 10) 172.

more closely than is usually done to the context of the Thersites episode, to the structure and language of the narrative, and to the kind of figure Thersites is—his role as a comic character and as a scapegoat.

II

To see the issue that divides Thersites from Odysseus and Agamemnon as simply one between legitimate authority and the challenge of an upstart is to ignore the implications of the events that lead up to the conflict. The ironic perspective afforded by the narrative from the beginning of the second book makes the value of that authority, already in question in Book 1, appear still more ambiguous.

The message of the “baneful dream” sent to Agamemnon is stated three times within a short space (lines 11–15, 28–33, 60–70), each time with a different effect: Zeus’ command to the Dream, to whom, and to the audience, the intent to deceive is clear; the Dream’s report of the message to Agamemnon, with some elaboration including the calculatedly false assurance that Zeus “is greatly concerned for and pities” him (line 27), which ensures the success of the deception (lines 35–40); and Agamemnon’s account of the dream (now twice removed from its source, Zeus) to the council of leaders, as basis for the proposal to test the army. This triple statement is unique in Homer, where a double statement of a message is the rule (once by the sender to the messenger, and then by the messenger to the recipient).¹⁵ The added repetition—by Agamemnon, of the very words that have duped him—underscores the irony of the situation. Himself really a victim of Zeus’ manipulation, Agamemnon, in blind confidence, proposes to deceive his subjects.¹⁶ This effect is reinforced by the verbal irony in Agamemnon’s speech to the soldiers (lines 111–15), where the statements that Zeus “has bound me in heavy delusion” and “has devised evil trickery,” though intended deceitfully, unwittingly express the truth. The degree of Agamemnon’s delusion is marked by the repetition of part of his deception speech (2.110–41) in his sincere proposal to return home later on (9.17–28), after the Achaeans have met reverses in battle.

But it is not just the conduct of this individual king that is at issue here. The dream with its repetitions places in question the very basis of the political order, in two ways. First, language here overtly becomes, not a means of persuasion and direct communication, but a medium of deceit and manipulation by the speaker and of delusion on the part of the hearer. The words of the

¹⁵ For this reason Zenodotus abbreviated lines 60–70 to a couplet. Against this, Schol. A and Eustathius transmit the argument that messages are necessarily repeated in the same words “two or three times” (δὶς καὶ τρίς)—a statement substantially repeated by Kirk (above, note 1, 121–22). That seems loosely stated; “two times” would be more accurate (cf. the way Zeus’ command to Priam to ransom Hector’s corpse is handled, *Il.* 24.144–58, 171–87, 194–99). “The third repetition of the message is really too much,” says Leaf, *The Iliad* (2nd ed., London 1900–1902; repr. Amsterdam 1960) I, 53. But the excess, as I argue, has considerable point.

¹⁶ Cf. Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge 1958; rept. New York 1965) 161.

dream-message are not ambiguous, as divine deceptions so often are, but an outright lie. Never mind the inherent power of language to ensnare with double meanings; as the trajectory of the lie is traced from Zeus through the dream to Agamemnon and then to his councillors, even the most straightforwardly univocal utterance, repeated in virtually the same words, is revealed as able to deceive and to form the basis for further deceit. In a situation so marked by inversions as this one is, language in even its simplest usage can be made to create a gap between word and deed ("The fool," says the narrator in line 38 commenting on Agamemnon's credulity, "he did not know the deeds that Zeus was devising"). Agamemnon's testing speech (lines 110–41) is more complex than the dream because, unlike Zeus, he wishes his hearers to do the opposite of what he seems to be urging. He artfully combines a despairing proposal to go home with words designed as reminders of how shameful that act would be (lines 119–33).¹⁷ He intends a complex message, but it fails because the army heeds only part of it and takes the proposal to leave at face value (as Agamemnon took the dream at face value). The failure in linguistic communication marks the disruption of relations between king and people.

In the second place, Zeus is conventionally the patron of kings; his own kingship over gods and men is, in accordance with royal ideology, the model for the human political order.¹⁸ Here, however, he has deceived the grandest mortal king. The dislocations in this situation are suggested by Nestor's response to Agamemnon's report of the dream (lines 80–82):

εἰ μὲν τις τὸν ὄνειρον Ἀχαιῶν ἄλλος ἔνισπε,
 ψεῦδος κεν φαίμεν καὶ νοσφιζοίμεθα μάλλον·
 νῦν δ' ἴδεν ὃς μέγ' ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν εὖχεται εἶναι.

If any other of the Achaeans had told about the dream,
 we would call it a lie and reject it.

But as is, he saw it who boasts to be by far the best of the
 Achaeans.

Nestor comes close here to a skepticism that would fit the situation better than he can know, but it does not occur to him, naturally, that Zeus would deceive. So he concentrates on the veracity of the one who told the dream; Agamemnon, being who he is, must not be lying (perhaps a slight irony in view of the king's proposal to test the army with a deceitful speech, lines 72–75). In this case, Nestor is correct: the account of the dream was truthful. But the dream it told was a lie.¹⁹ Thus, in the dream and the test, royal ideology is contradicted by confusion in the line of authority from Zeus to Agamemnon to the

¹⁷ Cf. Schol. bT on lines 115, 122, 123, 134, 140, Eustathius 185–88, von der Mühl (above, note 3) 201, and Kullmann (above, note 3), 254–55.

¹⁸ Cf. *Il.* 2.205–6 (discussed below), Hes. *Theog.* 96. For Zeus' kingship as validating the political order, including inequality among human beings, see Norman O. Brown's introduction to his translation of the *Theogony* (Indianapolis 1953) 15–35.

¹⁹ Contrast the similar lines at 24.218–24, where the (hypothetical) human interpreters of a divine message are supposed untrustworthy and the message itself true.

community. Zeus' guarantee of the institution of kingship, and thus the institution itself, begin to seem questionable.

We are, furthermore, hardly presented with a paradigm of kingship in Agamemnon's unmotivated and arbitrary decision to test the army. Testing is, of course, common in epic, and Agamemnon invokes established custom in his attempt at justification: ἡ θέμις ἐστί (line 73). But is it really *themis* for a king to deceive his subjects in a society that views the ideal ruler as speaking to persuade them along the paths of "straight judgments"?²⁰ A conventional phrase is here misused; the appeal to *themis* does not settle, but actually raises, the question of seemliness. The most that can be said for the test is that Agamemnon hopes thereby to arouse the soldiers' enthusiasm for battle when their morale, low anyway from ten years of fighting, has presumably been further dampened by the quarrel in Book 1.²¹ If so, he gravely misreads his troops. It will take the peculiar mechanism of the Thersites episode, the unanticipated result of Agamemnon's strategem, to produce the desired effect. The ironies proliferate.

In every other council scene in Homer, a proposal meets with disagreement and debate. This scene presents a glaring exception. No one opposes the plan to test the army, which will turn out to be very nearly disastrous. Nestor, the only one to comment on Agamemnon's speech, ignores the idea, and he is revered as the most trustworthy in council. Because the kings fail to do their job, they as a group will be pitted against the common soldiers—a dangerous situation that a political device like the council is designed to avoid. The way will then be open for Thersites to speak in the full assembly—an action by a commoner that is equally unparalleled in Homer.

The situational ironies continue in the stampede to the ships. It is in Agamemnon's interest, or so he believes, to get the army onto the battlefield; from that point of view the test, though revealing, is a failure. But it is also in Zeus' interest, because of his agreement with Thetis, that the army should fight. Agamemnon's initiative, in response to Zeus' manipulation of him in furtherance of that plan, threatens to undo Zeus' whole enterprise. When the divine and human kings work at cross-purposes, who is in control? The rush to the ships radically questions the idea of authority, bringing into sharp focus what has been implied already by the narrative. It would be a mistake, however, to read the chaos of the stampede as revealing the need for control, with only Agamemnon's and Zeus' particular ways of exerting power at issue. Far from being mere anarchy, the soldiers' action has considerable justice. It raises, on the part of a large segment of the community, the subversive question already asked by Achilles from an individual perspective in Book 1: why not go home?

²⁰ Cf. Hes. *Theog.* 81–93. If Hesiod's king uses circuitous speech (line 90), it is in order to stop quarrels (νεῖκος, line 87). Agamemnon, by his actions, causes a quarrel—with Thersites (note νεῖκεε, *Il.* 2.224).

²¹ See Schol. AbT and the spirited defense of the test by Eustathius 173, 185–86. But in his test Agamemnon deceives the army and plays insensitively on their war-weariness. Very different is his conduct to the *basileis* in the *epipoleis* of Book 4, where his "quarreling" (4.241, 336, 368) with those he sees hanging back is virtually a test, and where Diomedes, at least, knows exactly what Agamemnon is up to (4.412–18).

Not only are the soldiers' war-weary and homesick feelings understandable; in wanting to leave they are more right than they can know. For although the Achaeans will eventually sack Troy (and Odysseus and Nestor mention omens to that effect later in this book, lines 301–30, 350–53), we are also aware, as the army is not, that victory will exact a cost in human lives all the greater because of the quarrel in Book 1 and the plan that Zeus is trying to put into effect. More generally, the *Iliad* elsewhere seems to show awareness of a tradition that saw the Trojan War in the context of a myth of destruction, as the event that violently ended the age of the heroes.²² Thus, when Thersites denounces Agamemnon and the war, we should not dismiss him simply because of who and what he is.

Along with the narrative structure, a tangible object—Agamemnon's royal sceptre—focuses these issues of authority and its justification. Whitman and others have discussed the sceptre's prominent role in this scene,²³ but a few points need to be added or clarified. When Agamemnon, leaning on it, is about to test the army, its history is given, from Hephaestus to Zeus and down through the generations of Agamemnon's family (lines 100–109). The sceptre, with its evocation of peaceful succession within the family, not only embodies the ideal of royal authority which is now discredited by Agamemnon's speech; it also is a token of the descent of authority from Zeus to the human king just when that close relationship is severely disturbed. Then, when Odysseus takes the sceptre from the paralyzed Agamemnon as he goes to stem the rush to the ships, the king's impotence is stressed. Now all who discuss the sceptre take it as a device for characterizing Agamemnon. That leaves the idea of kingship unaffected; it is the standard by which Agamemnon is measured and found deficient. That may be partly the effect, but to leave matters there is to accept the dominant ideology within the text. I would argue that as in other respects what we should recognize is a crisis of kingship itself and its ideology. If the point were only Agamemnon's character, how would we account for what Odysseus, who allegedly acts as a king should, now proceeds to do?

In speeches contrasted by a careful parallelism (lines 188–97, 198–206), Odysseus, in his treatment of those he encounters, discriminates according to class.²⁴ He restrains "with gentle words" each "*basileus* and outstanding man he meets," saying, "friend, it is not fitting to intimidate you as though you were a

²² See Ruth Scodel, "The Achaean Wall and the Myth of Destruction," *HSCP* 86 (1982) 33–50.

²³ Whitman (above, note 16) 160–61, 261. Jasper Griffin writes to similar effect but with fewer nuances in *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford 1980) 9–12.

²⁴ The *epipoleis* in Book 4 seems structured to contrast with this scene (see also note 21 above). There parallelism distinguishes Agamemnon's praise of those who are arming for battle from his rebukes of those who are not (with 4.232–33 and 240–41, cf. 2.188–89 and 198–99). His treatment of the latter is designed to rouse them to action, and here Agamemnon is acting more in line with established notions of kingship. Note the straightforward *κοιρανέων* at 4.250, whereas the same participle at 2.270 points to another, more problematical side of kingship, as I argue below. The essential difference is that in Book 4 class is not at issue.

coward [*kakos*]” (line 190). It is just possible that *kakos* also implies “base-born” here as it can in later Greek, even though many would deny this.²⁵ The context of self-conscious class-distinctions could lend the word this shading. This speech does contain an oblique threat (lines 195–97):

μή τι χολωσάμενος ῥέξῃ κακὸν υἱας Ἀχαιῶν·
θυμὸς δὲ μέγας ἐστὶ διοτρεφέων βασιλῆων,
τιμὴ δ' ἐκ Διὸς ἐστί, φιλεῖ δέ ἐ μητίετα Ζεὺς.

Take care lest in anger he [Agamemnon] harm the sons of the
Achaeans.

The anger of Zeus-nurtured kings is great;
their honor is from Zeus, and councillor Zeus cherishes them.

So even against aristocrats the idea of force must be asserted. We have, in fact, heard similar words once before—on the lips of Calchas (1.78–83), whose prophecy precipitated the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. But there it was precisely the king's right to indulge his anger, and more generally his complete superiority over the highest ranks, that came into question. Moreover, the appeal here to Zeus' validation of power comes in an episode in which Zeus has tricked his supposed protege. Thus, although the speech succeeds in bringing its recipients under control, to us the bases claimed for the royal power appear less than solid.

We learn more about that power in Odysseus' utterly different treatment of the common soldiers (δῆμου...ἄνδρα, line 198).²⁶ Rather than merely remind them of Agamemnon's possible anger, Odysseus acts directly himself as Agamemnon's substitute, using the royal sceptre to herd the soldiers back from the ships to the assembly if not actually bludgeoning them with it.²⁷ As he does so, he gives a speech shot through with the ideology of class. The commoners should listen to others who are φέρτεροι than they (line 201). Nestor used the same adjective for the quality that makes Agamemnon superior to Achilles (1.281); in this usage, it reflects the ideology of authority based on position.²⁸ But whereas Achilles also has a claim because of his ability—he is κάρτερός, 1.280—the commoners “count” in neither war nor council (line 202:

²⁵ E.g., Calhoun (above, note 7) 301–3. That the word can be used in this sense seems suggested by γένος...κακόν at 14.126 (despite Calhoun, p. 204), though the addition of the noun makes an important difference. At 15.196, which resembles 2.190, and where rank is clearly at issue, the same ambiguity between “coward” and “one of low birth” may be present. Cf. also West on Hes. *W.D.* 287–92.

²⁶ Evidently the political terms in this passage are used with precision. For the correlation and opposition between *basileus* (cf. 2.188) and *demos* (cf. 2.198), see Raymond Descat, “L'idéologie homérique du pouvoir,” *REA* 81 (1979) 229–40 (especially 237–38).

²⁷ The verb is ἐλάσασκεν (2.199). This implies the threat of violence, if not its actual use.

²⁸ Cf. also *Il.* 1.186 and Donlan (above, note 7) 58–59.

the negative of the heroic ideal stated by Phoenix at 9.443). Odysseus ends with his famous statement of royal political theory (lines 204–7):²⁹

“οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίη. εἷς κοίρανος ἔστω,
εἷς βασιλεύς, ᾧ δῶκε Κρόνου πάϊς ἀγκυλομήτεω
σκήπτρον τ’ ἡδὲ θέμιστας, ἵνα σφίσι βουλευήσι.”
ὥς ὃ γε κοιρανέων δέεπε στρατόν...

“Not a good thing is multiplicity of lords [*polukoiranie*]. Let
there be one lord [*koiranos*],
one ruler [*basileus*], to whom the son of crooked-counselling
Kronos has given
the sceptre and the precedents, so that he may take counsel for
them.”

So he marshalled the army, playing the lord [*koiraneon*].

Here again is the appeal to Zeus, undercut not only by the context of the scene as a whole but also by Odysseus’ actions. If line 206 is genuine,³⁰ we can hardly fail to connect mention of the sceptre as symbol of royal power with the ambiguous value of *this* sceptre in Agamemnon’s hands earlier and with what Odysseus is now doing with it. In any case, the participle *koiraneon* in the last line resonates with the two nouns from the same root in line 204. Odysseus shows us kingship in action for what it essentially is, brutally stripped of civil niceties. Here, and when he beats Thersites with it, the sceptre is both symbol

²⁹ With this speech Odysseus becomes “the proto-evangelist of hierarchical order in European thought,” says W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme* (2nd ed., Ann Arbor 1968) 27. The history of interpretation thus shows a tendency to read this scene according to an ideology—something that, as I argue, can be done only by taking these lines out of the context that limits and qualifies them. The Emperor Domitian, for example, found line 204 convenient to quote when he felt his imperial prerogatives challenged in even a trivial way (Suet. *Domitian* 12.3—I owe this reference to Professor Frederick Ahl). At the end of Book 12 of the *Metaphysics* (1076A), Aristotle uses the line in an argument for the existence of a first principle, and he introduces it with an explicitly political metaphor: τὰ δὲ ὄντα οὐ βούλεται πολιτεύεσθαι κακῶς. “οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίη· εἷς κοίρανος [ἔστω].” This shows how political presuppositions can shape cosmological speculation. Eustathius (202) later makes a similar analogy in Christian terms between kingship (praise of which is prompted by line 204) and the idea of a cosmic hierarchy:

ὅτι δὲ ἀγαθὸν τὸ μόναρχον, δηλοῖ καὶ ἡ κατὰ κόσμον
διάθεσις, ἐνὶ διοικουμένη κηδεμόνι τῷ παμβασιλεῖ. καὶ τὰ
κάλλιστα τῶν ἐγκοσμίων κατὰ μονάδα παρῆκται· εἷς ἥλιος
τοῖς περὶ γῆν ἐπιστατεῖν ἡμέρας βεβράβενται· μιὰ σελήνη
νυκτός ἐστιν ὀφθαλμός· ἓνα βασιλέα τῆς ἐν ἡμῖν ἀκροπολέως,
τὸν νοῦν, ὁ τῶν βασιλέων βασιλεὺς ὑπερίδρυσεν. οὕτω τοίνυν
καὶ πόλις εὖ ἔχει ἅν, ἐνὶ διευθυνομένη ἄρχοντι.

³⁰ I follow Monro and Allen in retaining line 206, with Dio Chrysostom’s βουλευήσι for the unmetrical βασιλεύη, because δῶκε (205) needs an object. See Kirk (above, note 1) 137.

and instrument of the coercion of underlings by those in power—a point suppressed in most discussions of it.³¹

Of course, a king's authority does rest, ultimately, on force; Agamemnon rules over more people than Achilles, as Nestor points out (*Il.* 1.281), and Zeus enforces his orders, when he needs to, by reminding the other gods of his physical might (e.g., *Il.* 8.5–27). That this is the true source of power is no particular secret, and kingship does not depend for its existence on ideology. But ideology can at least call attention away from the presence of force and provide powerful additional reasons for subjects to accept their place as not only necessary but right and proper also. It is in a king's own interest to be known, like Odysseus, as gentle to his people "like a father" (*Od.* 2.234) rather than as harmful and arbitrary like—in Penelope's view—the common run of kings (*Od.* 4.690–92). Penelope's words imply a judgment (e.g., ἐξάισιον), and indeed there is plentiful evidence in epic poetry that a king was expected to act justly although he was free to do otherwise. The paradigmatic king, Zeus, combines might with an enlightened rule, according to Hesiod (*Theog.* 71–74); if the children of Styx attend Zeus as personifications of his strength (*Theog.* 383–88), Themis is his second wife (*Theog.* 901–906). Human life flourishes under good kings (*Od.* 19.109–14, Hes. *W.D.* 225–37), and Zeus sends whirlwind and flood when crooked judgments are given "by force" in the market-place (*Il.* 16.384–93). Hesiod's fable of the hawk and the nightingale (*W.D.* 202–12) is followed by a passage on the superiority of *dike* to *hybris*.³²

³¹ Griffin (above, note 23) 10, perhaps unintentionally, makes this point: "...with the sceptre he [Odysseus] *hits those of low rank* who are urging flight, with it he *thrashes the insubordinate Thersites*, and holding it he makes the speech which restores morale and is greeted with cheers by the army. The significance is clear: *this is how to be a king*, and Agamemnon's failure in the role is symbolized in the treatment of that inherently significant object, the royal sceptre" (emphasis added). Cf. Reinhardt (above, note 2) 113: "Die Symbolik redet für sich selbst: er [Odysseus] is der wahre König." If thrashing subordinates is really how to be a king, that should not be so easily accepted without comment. Otherwise, one falls into the trap of accepting at face value the ideology that the text makes problematical. See also Robert Mondi, "SKHPTOUXOI BASILEIS: An Argument for Divine Kingship in Early Greece," *Arethusa* 13 (1980) 203–16. His argument, though questionable in detail, helps us appreciate the significance of the sceptre that comes into play here, but his remarks on the treatment of Thersites (p. 212) similarly ignore the complexity of the issues. The extent to which apologetic euphemism can be taken is illustrated by Kirk (above, note 1) 136, on lines 198–99: "The use of the royal sceptre of the house of Atreus as an instrument for pushing the troops around is a little surprising, though understandable in the circumstances."

³² Mario Puelma, "Sänger und König: Zum Verständnis von Hesiods Tierfabel," *MH* 29 (1972) 86–109, sees Hesiod's use of this fable as representing a new consciousness of *dike* in contrast to the *Iliad's* acceptance of the right of the stronger, as exemplified by both Achilles' failure to press his defiance of Agamemnon and the suppression of Thersites. His argument, besides oversimplifying the Homeric scenes, rests on the widespread (but I think questionable) assumption that moral concepts evolved only after Homer. *Il.*

So there is nothing particularly shocking by prevailing standards when Odysseus uses force on the soldiers, but there is nothing admirable either. A gap has opened between ideology and the actual exercise of authority. The soldiers might naturally feel resentment when reality does not measure up to the model that justifies the social hierarchy. To us, Odysseus' actions inevitably appear in a dubious light when, at this moment of crisis, the arbitrary nature of royal ideology is revealed. This scene, along with the Thersites episode, thus takes its place in a sequence of scenes in Books 1–4 that show that the Trojan War, and especially its continuation in the narrative of the *Iliad*, rests on nothing but the violence inherent in human beings and the structure of human and divine authority.

The skillful design of the narrative in this part of Book 2 is significant. Verbal and thematic repetitions of lines 149–50 in 207–9 contrast the rush to the ships with its reversal. Then the seating of the army, similarly described in lines 99 (before Agamemnon stands up to speak) and 211 (just before Thersites is introduced) aligns Thersites' defiance with Agamemnon's testing-speech.³³ A challenge that involves misuse of authority from above is matched by a challenge to authority from below. In addition, two "wind-and-wave" similes (lines 209–10, 394–97)—part of a series of similes that articulate the action throughout³⁴—contrast the army's return to the assembly in uneasy submission with their departure from the assembly to prepare for battle in restored unanimity. How does the Thersites episode effect this reversal? To what extent does it resolve the political issues raised previously?

III

Thersites—whose name can mean "courage," but here clearly has the less admirable sense "boldness, impudence,"³⁵—is, in Whitman's phrase, "the incarnation of the ugly truth."³⁶ But we should not see him solely in a negative light, as Whitman does, even if we should not idealize him either. He is presented as an object of ridicule, but I would suggest that the issues that surround his brief appearance in the poem are not straightforward.

The description of Thersites (2.211–24), which has influenced most readings of the scene, might seem designed simply to arouse contempt for him in the audience. It is presented from the perspective of the heroic standards. But can we assume that even the stylized language of narrative always has a single

16.384–93 then must be explained away as a later interpolation under Hesiodic influence (so Puelma, p. 103, note 68)—and the argument becomes hopelessly circular.

³³ On these correspondences, see Kirk (above, note 1) 138 (on lines 208–10 and 211). In his note on line 75 (p.123), Kirk also points out the frequency with which ἐρητύειν, "restrain," occurs in this part of Book 2—a sign that the exercise of control is a major issue.

³⁴ Cf. Carroll Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems*, Hypomnemata 49 (Göttingen: 1977) 38–42.

³⁵ Cf. the patronymic of the suitor Ctesippus, Πολυθερσεΐδης, *Od.* 22.287. See P. Chantraine, "A propos de Thersite," *AC* 32 (1963) 18–27.

³⁶ Whitman (above, note 16) 261.

meaning, independent of the context? Do the facts presented—Thersites' disorderly speech, his ugliness, the enmity Achilles and Odysseus feel for him—automatically turn the audience against him? This description must be read against the background of the earlier narrative in Book 2, particularly Odysseus' treatment of the common soldiers just before.

No other character in the *Iliad* is given so detailed a physical description as Thersites is (lines 217–19), though there are some parallels in the *Odyssey*.³⁷ As these suggest, although certain heroic figures may be called handsome in general, it is departures from the heroic norm that elicit physical details. In his person, Thersites radically challenges that norm: not everyone in this heroic world is well-formed. His grotesque ugliness, moreover, seems to play on the Greek tendency to regard physical appearance as a correlate of moral worth, and to relate both to social class (aristocrats, of course, being both good and handsome).³⁸ This assumption is ideological; it attempts to justify social distinctions by giving them a biological basis and thus by making what is cultural seem natural. But in this case we have just seen the presumably handsome heroes behaving in a less than admirable way. If the actions of the leaders are inconsistent with their appearance, then we cannot assume that the behavior of a common soldier will be wrong because he is ugly. The social attitude that makes appearance an index of quality is simultaneously suggested by overt description and undercut by the context.

Thersites' way of speaking is consistent with his appearance, but in this respect too values are ambiguous (lines 211–16):

Ἄλλοι μὲν ῥ' ἔζοντο, ἐρήτυθεν δὲ καθ' ἔδρας·
 Θερσίτης δ' ἔτι μούνος ἀμετροεπὴς ἐκολῶα,
 ὃς ἔπεα φρεσὶ ἦσιν ἄκοσμά τε πολλὰ τε ἤδη,
 μάψ, ἀτὰρ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, ἐριζέμεναι βασιλεῦσιν,
 ἀλλ' ὅ τι οἱ εἴσατο γελοῖον Ἀργείοισιν
 ἔμμεναι· αἴσχιστος δὲ ἀνὴρ ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθε.

Now the others were sitting down and were restrained in their
 places.

But Thersites of unmeasured speech alone kept scolding,
 who knew many disorderly words in his mind,
 to quarrel with kings rashly, in violation of order,
 but [he said] whatever seemed to him to be humorous
 to the Argives. He was the ugliest man who came beneath Ilium.

³⁷ Odysseus on his transformation into a beggar (*Od.* 13.397–403, 430–33), Eurybates (*Od.* 19.244–46). Contrast the lack of detail in such descriptions of physical beauty as *Od.* 6.229–35, 23.157–62, and see G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, chapters 20–23. The *Iliad* also occasionally displays an awareness that appearance and quality do not always coincide: 2.673–75, 3.209–24.

³⁸ See H. C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (Cambridge:1965) 15. Lucian brilliantly inverts this idea in the last of his *Dialogues of the Dead*. Nireus, “the handsomest man who came beneath Ilium” (*Il.* 2.673; contrast 2.216) and Thersites ask Menippus to judge which of them is the more handsome. Menippus refuses, on the grounds that all in the underworld look alike: “for in Hades there is ἰσοτιμία—a blatantly *political* term.

Thersites by himself continues the turbulence of the army's stampede to the ships (lines 211–12)—but verbally. The text emphasizes the disorder of his discourse, which contrasts with the other soldiers' submission to restraint (line 211). It is true that μάψ, ἄτὰρ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον (line 214), and similar phrases usually imply condemnation of a violation of boundaries.³⁹ Thersites does not observe the decorum expected of those who speak in the assembly. But that is part of the aristocratic ideal, and the issue of discourse here is identified with that of class and shows the same ambivalence. Thersites' lack of restraint in speaking takes the form of quarreling with the *basileis*, his "betters" (line 214)—the very offense for which Odysseus will presently rebuke him (lines 247, 250–51). In his case, observance of order would be silence, like that of the other soldiers. But again, we have just witnessed the failure of the kings in council to oppose the test of the army, Agamemnon's deceitful use of language in the assembly, and the imposition of order through physical coercion; and we have seen on what a shaky basis the Achaeans' continued presence at Troy rests. So although order may be essential to military discipline, Thersites' copious and disordered speech has a claim on our attention also.

This disorder has a further point. The overthrow of the restraints normally imposed on social life, including those of class, makes this a comic moment. Not just Thersites' mode of speech but also the fact that a commoner speaks in the assembly at all, indicates a momentary relaxation of rules. Thersites always says what he thinks will be "matter for laughter [γελοῖτον]" for the Argives (line 215), and indeed his closest literary affinities are with comedy. His ugliness and the anti-heroic realism with which his appearance is described, his pretensions, his skill at imitation and parody (in his speech he appropriates the language of the aristocrats)—these traits mark him as a comic figure. He represents the comic type of the *alazon* or imposter, in the particular form of the *miles gloriosus*.⁴⁰ Through him the *Iliad*, which Aristotle and many after him have associated with tragedy, incorporates elements of what would become the complementary genre, comedy.⁴¹ In Northrop Frye's useful terms, it shifts from

³⁹ Cf. *Il.* 5.759, *Od.* 3.138. It is striking that everywhere in Homer but at *Il.* 2.214, this phrase, οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, μάψ, and μαψιδίως occur in direct speech, as though the judgment conveyed is emotionally colored. Cf. Jasper Griffin, "Homeric Words and Speakers," *JHS* 106 (1986) 36–57 (especially 38). When the *narrative* uses such a phrase after the ideas of order and restraint have been revealed as problematical, the judgment implied is not to be taken as any more objective and reliable. What may be formulaic and traditional appears ambiguous, in a way that reflects the complexity of the political situation.

⁴⁰ Cf. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton 1971) 39–40, 172. See also Cedric H. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge, Mass. 1964) 46–48. Whitman's discussion of Thersites takes place within a definition of the "comic hero" and has different emphases from mine.

⁴¹ We know of a "low mimetic" epic, the *Margites* (which evidently included iambic as well as dactylic lines), and the extant Homeric Hymn to Hermes has something of the same character. Aristotle (*Poet.* 1448B34–1449A2) says that the *Margites* stands in the same relation to comedy as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* do to tragedy, but this seems unnecessarily schematic and implies that comedy is

the high mimetic to the low mimetic mode.⁴² Thersites helps us view society from below. He also draws the aristocratic Odysseus into a comic mode of action (the beating).⁴³ In a way that parallels and subsumes the social issues, the fundamental generic assumptions of the *Iliad* are here challenged.

Thersites need not be taken as typical of the common soldiers, however. He represents their attitudes in exaggerated form. And, on the other hand, in his speech he lays claim to heroic prowess (see especially line 231)—another exaggeration. Like many comic characters, he is on the margins of society and blurs class distinctions. His detached, ironic perspective also allows a peculiar clarity of vision, bringing into focus tensions and contradictions in society that otherwise would remain half concealed, tolerated by the commoners with inarticulate resentment at most. And it is as a marginal, comic figure that Thersites, through his defiance and the reaction it provokes, involuntarily performs a healing function for his society.

When the soldiers return to the assembly, the situation is tense. Emotional turbulence seems indicated by the noise they make and the simile that describes it (lines 209–10), and the nature of their feeling may be more explicitly described in the introduction to Thersites' speech (lines 220–24):

ἔχθιστος δ' Ἀχιλλῆϊ μάλιστ' ἦν ἡδ' Ὀδυσῆϊ·
τῷ γὰρ νεικεῖσκε· τότ' αὖτ' Ἀγαμέμνονι δίφῳ
ὀξέα κεκλήγων λέγ' ὀνειδεα· τῷ δ' ἄρ' Ἀχαιοὶ
ἐκπάγλως κοτέοντο νεμέσσηθέν τ' ἐνὶ θυμῷ
αὐτὰρ ὁ μακρὰ βοῶν Ἀγαμέμνονα νείκεε μύθοφ.

He [Thersites] was most hateful to Achilles and Odysseus;
for he always used to upbraid them. But on that occasion against
godlike Agamemnon
he uttered reproaches, shouting shrilly. Against him [*toi*] the
Achaeans
were extremely angry, and they felt resentment in their hearts.
But he, shouting loudly, rebuked Agamemnon with a speech.

foreign to Homer. There have been a few modern treatments of humor in his poems, which usually do not apply the notions of "humor" and "comedy" very rigorously and which overlook Thersites. An exception is E. E. Sikes, "The Humor of Homer," *CR* 54 (1940) 121–27, who remarks that the ugliness of Thersites and of Hephaestus in *Iliad* 1 (note the suggestive connection between these two, already made by Schol. bT on line 212, which will be explored below) is an example of Bergsonian humor caused by inelasticity. That is a good way of accounting for the mechanism of humor in these two scenes, but I would not agree with Bergson's positivistic conception of an improving society requiring a more and more elastic adaptation from its members and ejecting those few who remain rigid. My reading of the Thersites scene is just the opposite, though Bergson's emphasis on laughter as a mode of humiliation and expulsion seems to me important. On Thersites as a comic figure, see also Eustathius 204, 206, 216.

⁴² For definitions, see Frye (above, note 40) 33–34.

⁴³ A similar "levelling" occurs in Soph. *Phil.* 438–44, where Odysseus is confused with Thersites on the basis of unscrupulous verbal cleverness. And in the comic episode of the *Odyssey* most like the Thersites scene (18.1–107), Odysseus, in the role of beggar, beats the rival beggar Irus.

It is, unfortunately, uncertain at whom the Achaeans are angry, but there are good reasons for taking the pronoun τῷ in line 222 as referring to Agamemnon rather than Thersites.⁴⁴ The soldiers' hopes of return home have been aroused and then frustrated, and they have been herded back in a humiliating way that stresses their subservience.⁴⁵ This resentment would naturally be focused on Agamemnon as their commander-in-chief. Thersites' punishment discharges the tension (line 270):

οἱ δὲ καὶ ἀχνύμενοί περ ἐπ' αὐτῷ ἡδὺ γέλασαν.

And they [the Achaeans], although they were grieved, laughed
sweetly at him.

They laugh, *although grieved*—but at the way Thersites, or they themselves, have been treated?⁴⁶ There is not, finally, much difference, since the former is merely a specific instance of the latter; but Thersites' marginal status would prevent their close identification with him. Distance, in fact, is key here. Thersites puts himself in the way of punishment by his defiance, and as a caricature of the common soldiers he is both like them and different. Neither leaders nor troops have to suffer; Thersites is a "third party" who offers an outlet in pleasant laughter for the divisive tensions in this dangerously polarized situation.

⁴⁴ See Schol. T and Ameis-Hentze, *Anhang* I, 116. I would add a stylistic argument. We are first told that Thersites used to abuse Achilles and Odysseus especially, but that on this occasion he rebuked Agamemnon. We next would naturally be informed why he fixed on Agamemnon—because the Achaeans were angry at their ruler. The style is paratactic; instead of "Agamemnon, at whom the Achaeans were angry," we find the information inserted in an independent clause framed on either side by clauses that give essentially the same information ("he reproached Agamemnon") in a characteristic ABA structure. If the pronoun referred to Thersites, we would expect the clause to come immediately after τὸ γὰρ νεικέϊσκε, and even if this were not a problem we would be forced to accept a view of line 270 that spoils the effect of Thersites' speech and punishment (as does Kirk [above, note 1] 144). The shift in pronoun reference in 222 and 224 is somewhat awkward, but not intolerable. I would take ἄρα in 222 as "you see," and αὐτάρ in 224 as marking a return to the introduction to Thersites' speech after an explanatory "digression." For this use of αὐτάρ, the best parallels are *Il.* 21.71 (resumes 68–69; note ἄρα, 69), 16.728 (resumes 726), 21.157 (resumes 154–55), and in larger narrative structures, 1.430, 488 (cf. *h. Apollo* 177). Cf. also *Il.* 2.667, 4.116, 4.231, 5.620, 10.154, 15.523, 19.40, and H. Ebeling, *Lexikon Homericum* I (Leipzig 1880) s.v. αὐτάρ, section (b).

⁴⁵ I therefore do not find the language of line 223 too violent to describe their feelings towards Agamemnon, as does Kirk (above, note 1) 140. Leaf (above, note 15, 65), who takes τῷ as Agamemnon, weakens his point by attributing the army's indignation solely to the king's treatment of Achilles in Book 1. Eustathius (208), assuming that the reference is to Thersites, expresses admiration for the Achaeans as φιλοβασιλεῖς for resenting the στασιαστής when they should be angry at Agamemnon for testing them and hindering their return home—a mixture of royalism and shrewdness. Cf. his comment at 219 (on line 274).

⁴⁶ See Schol. AbT on line 270, Eustathius 218, and Leaf (above, note 15) 68.

Now speeches of exhortation, rebuke, and threats by Odysseus, Nestor, and Agamemnon, which before would only have aggravated the tensions, are effective (lines 394–97). The united army will march out for battle in a great display of Achaean might celebrated in the Catalogue of Ships. The Thersites scene has performed the socially integrative function typical of comedy.⁴⁷

But this description is from the point of view of the characters within the narrative. From an external perspective, the cost of this splendid new unity is also clear: not only the physical cruelty to Thersites but also the army's renewed submission to authority.⁴⁸ The soldiers speak of Thersites' beating by Odysseus as a grandly heroic exploit (lines 272–75)—the incongruity is obvious—but they then draw the lesson that their leaders would approve (lines 276–77; cf. 247, 250–51):

οὐ θῆν μιν πάλιν αὖτις ἀνήσει θυμὸς ἀγῆνωρ
νεικεῖν βασιλῆας ὀνειδείους ἐπέεσσιν.

Never again will his [Thersites'] manly spirit allow him
to quarrel with the kings [*basileis*] with reproachful words.

M. I. Finley says that although in Homeric society there will have been differences as well as similarities in values between commoners and aristocrats, in the epics the aristocratic viewpoint prevails.⁴⁹ But what does that mean if not that the common people are co-opted into a system imposed from above? We see this process here. For the Achaean army, ideology has indeed been validated. But the text makes clear what that ideology is—a mystification that serves to disguise the lack of good reasons for continuing to fight.

In this way we can evaluate the resolution of the tensions aroused not just in Book 2 but in the first book as well. It is often observed that Thersites' speech is a parody of Achilles' earlier reproaches of Agamemnon, but the implications of this fact have not been fully explored. On the one hand, of course, the parody sets in relief the stature of Achilles. When Achilles claims high achievements in battle, he must be taken seriously; when the deformed Thersites claims similar feats (line 231), he appears ridiculous. Yet the contrast goes further. Both challenge the principle of "one ruler," but individual qualities aside, the reason why Achilles can make the challenge stick whereas Thersites is beaten into silence is their difference in class. After all, one cannot beat an Achilles, but one can find an outlet for this desire in Thersites. On the other hand, parody implies an irreducible element of similarity, and there is a close link between them. Thersites is Achilles' comic double. His scene repeats the

⁴⁷ For a discussion of Thersites and the effect of his intervention in the context of a Greek tradition of attitudes concerning shame, see Eddie R. Lowry, Jr., *Thersites: A Study in Comic Shame* (Diss. Harvard University 1980)—a copy of which I was able to obtain only at a late stage in my own work. Our views correspond in some ways, especially in regard to comic elements in the episode, but they also differ fundamentally in emphasis and interpretation.

⁴⁸ Cf. Schol. bT on line 272: πῶς προειπὼν αὐτοὺς γεγελακέναι σπουδαῖα καὶ οὐ γελοῖα παράγει λέγοντας; τάχα οὖν τοῖς ἐπὶ Θερσίτου παρήρηται τὸ θρασὺ καὶ παρρησιαστικὸν αὐτῶν Ὀδυσσεύς.

⁴⁹ Finley (above, note 5) 111.

assembly and quarrel of Book 1, in a debased but clearer form, stripped of the mystifications produced by the heroic (aristocratic) ideal of honor. That scene was, after all, a quarrel over booty and thus over the reasons for fighting this war (like the quarrel, the war was caused by a dispute over a woman). A simmering social tension seemed to underlie the immediate issue there, for Achilles expressed his resentment at Agamemnon's always claiming the largest share of booty (1.163–68). Thus in Book 1 we have an aristocrat (or lesser king) rebelling against the monarch within a social structure in which, in the higher reaches, spheres of authority are not clearly defined. In Book 2 a commoner defies the ruling class as a whole, with the ruling class closing ranks against the commoners.⁵⁰ Taken together, the two scenes lay bare the tensions that are close to undoing the entire social fabric.

But does not Thersites, like everyone else in the *Iliad*, speak within an aristocratic scale of values, which therefore appears "generally acceptable," as Adkins argues?⁵¹ We will not be driven to this conclusion if we attend to the linguistic implications of Thersites' parody with the help of Bakhtin's theory of discourses. Thersites' speech is an example of what Bakhtin calls "indirect discourse"—"the representation of another's word, another's language, in intonational quotation marks."⁵² Language itself—here the "straightforward" language of the aristocrats, with its assumption (however modified in practice)⁵³ of a simple correspondence between the word and its object—thus becomes the object of representation. It is presented, as Bakhtin would say, in the light of another potential language, not actually present but implied, informal and colloquial. What that language would be and what it would say, we of course cannot know, since it cannot be spoken in this text. In a world so dominated by the outlook of one class, Thersites has only the official language in which to challenge a basic assumption of that class: that there must be "one ruler," that Agamemnon, whatever his conduct, must be obeyed. And so Thersites resorts to

⁵⁰ Cf. Finley (above, note 5) 106–7.

⁵¹ A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford 1960) 34.

⁵² M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin 1981) 50. In the rest of this paragraph I draw mainly on his discussion of parody in the first essay (pp. 51–68; cf. also 75–76), but similar ideas recur throughout the book. On the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language, see especially pp. 269–75. In my argument that the Thersites scene presents us with one of the anticipations of "novelistic discourse" that he discusses (though not, of course, full "dialogism"), I am in one sense using Bakhtin against himself, since he sees epic, and indeed all poetry, as "unitary" discourse (cf. especially his remarks on ideology in epic on p. 234—exactly the position I am opposing here). I would argue that he presents epic as excessively monolithic, perhaps for the sake of a clearer description of the novel. In another sense, however, I am doing no violence to his theory, since one of Bakhtin's examples of parody is the *Margites*, and Thersites resembles the hero of that poem (see note 41 above). The only difference is that I argue that the *Iliad* contains within itself a phenomenon that Bakhtin locates outside it.

⁵³ See Claus (above, note 12), as against Adam Parry, "The Language of Achilles," *TAPA* 87 (1956) 1–7.

parody. Achilles speaks from within the established value-system, although his case perhaps reveals the actual complexity of its demands,⁵⁴ whereas Thersites furnishes us, for the only time in the poem, with a parodic distance from it. From our point of view, if not for the soldiers within the narrative, his travesty is corrective. The traditional epic diction in its normal usage is, in Bakhtin's term, "centripetal." It creates a unified verbal and ideological world by sustaining a national myth. Parody, like that of Thersites, liberates consciousness from the power of this discourse, reveals that the world is too rich and complex to be captured in a straightforward and unitary language, and challenges the unifying socio-political ideology. From the beginning of Book 2 we have seen the communicative function of the centripetal language distorted as a sign of social crisis. The movement into parody of that language allows expression of another viewpoint, if only indirectly and temporarily.

When they comment on the beating of Thersites (lines 272–77), the soldiers at first retain some parodic distance in their ironic praise of Odysseus. But they then express scorn for Thersites, and in the last two lines of the speech (276–77), as we have seen, they adopt the language and values of their superiors. Such are the complex dynamics of their laughter as it brings them back to submission. This result, however, does not cancel the effects of the Thersites scene for us. The exposure of the true basis of political unity helps shape our perspective on the rest of the narrative. It is part of the *Iliad's* beautifully balanced presentation of society, warfare, and heroic conduct in both their magnificence and their costs. If we now consider Thersites' role from a slightly different standpoint, we might gain a more exact understanding of the social processes at work in the scene and the ideology that surrounds them.

IV

Thersites is the victim of the comic process. All the emotion and potential violence that have accumulated in the first two books, and, it would seem, over the ten years of war,⁵⁵ are unloaded onto him. He is, in short, a scapegoat. Usener and Gilbert Murray, in fact, have seen Thersites as a *pharmakos* or ritual scapegoat; they draw on the punishment with which Odysseus threatens him (*Il.* 2.258–64), an Aetolian myth of Thersites, and Laconian ritual.⁵⁶ Gregory Nagy has discussed the story of Thersites' death at Achilles' hands, which was told in the *Aithiopsis*, in a similar way.⁵⁷ These suggestions may tell us about what

⁵⁴ See Claus (above, note 12).

⁵⁵ To judge from lines 213–16 and 220–21, the kind of behavior Thersites displays here has been habitual with him, and thus he has periodically served as the target for relief of tensions.

⁵⁶ H. Usener, *Der Stoff des griechischen Epos, Sitzungsber. Wiener Akad. Phil.-Hist. Kl.* 137 (1897) 42–63; Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (rept. of 4th ed., Oxford 1967) 212–15. Cf. the brief comment by Louis Gernet in "Dolon the Wolf," *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece* (Baltimore 1981) 131.

⁵⁷ Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979) 279–80. The terms in which he discusses the Iliadic episode, blame vs. praise (pp. 259–63), seem in some ways parallel to those I have used (comedy vs. tragedy), but I would

lies behind the text of the *Iliad* and may give an idea of the possibilities that Homer might have seen in Thersites, but they will not take us very far in appreciating the role Thersites plays within this narrative itself. At most, they might alert us to the presence here of a sacrificial pattern.⁵⁸ We might get farther, and be able to engage the narrative in more detail, by using René Girard's theory of the scapegoat in *Violence and the Sacred*.⁵⁹ Despite problems in this theory (one of which I shall discuss later), it is worth exploring what a Girardian reading of the Thersites scene and its context might be, and what perspective it might offer on the issues discussed here.

The situation set forth in the first two books bears some striking resemblance to Girard's "sacrificial crisis." In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* Girard finds two themes which both present aspects of the sacrificial crisis and, through the duplication, disguise its nature: on the one hand, the plague, which reveals "the collective character of the disaster, its universally contagious nature," but ignores violence and the effacement of differences, and on the other hand the patricide/incest motif, through which "violence and non-difference are presented in magnified and highly concentrated form, but limited to a single individual" so that "the collective element is ignored."⁶⁰ At the beginning of the *Iliad* there is also a plague, a collective disaster; and if we want a counterpart to the patricide/incest motif which concentrates violence in a single person, an excellent candidate would be Achilles' wrath or *menis*, presented in the first line as the theme of the poem. Here too, then, violence is at issue, its nature at once illuminated and concealed.

Apollo, we are told, sent the plague and caused the quarrel which aroused Achilles' *menis*. In Girard's terms this is a "mythic" explanation which disguises the true location of violence—*within* humanity. Besides, Apollo inflicts the plague in response to Chryses' prayer, itself a result of the capture of his daughter and Agamemnon's rebuff of him, which are in turn consequences of the

not agree that here "it is Epos that gets the last laugh on the blame poet [Thersites]" (262).

⁵⁸ Usener (above, note 56, 44) makes clear the aims and assumptions with which he works: "Hervorragende Denker wie Lessing und Herder haben versucht, Absicht und Wirkung der Scene [i.e., of Thersites] zu analysieren. Nötiger als solche Fragen aufzuwerfen scheint es mir, den Hintergrund der Sage zu ermitteln und dadurch die Grenzen für die Freiheit der dichterischen Bewegung abzustecken." I do not deny that such an enterprise is valuable in a certain way, but I do not agree that it is "more necessary" to go behind Homer's text than to make it the primary object of attention.

⁵⁹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (Baltimore 1979), hereafter "Girard." Cf. the brief but suggestive remarks on the comic *pharmakos* by Frye (above, note 40) 45, especially: "Insisting on the theme of social revenge on an individual, however great a rascal he may be, tends to make him look less involved in guilt and the society more so. This is particularly true of characters who have been trying to amuse either the actual or the internal audience, and who are the comic counterparts of the tragic hero as artist."

⁶⁰ Girard 76–77.

Achaeans' presence at Troy.⁶¹ The opening lines of the poem fail to capture the originating event, which keeps receding. We would have to trace the causes of the situation back to the reasons for the Trojan War itself, which are themselves mythic. "In the domain of impure violence," says Girard, "any search for origins leads back to myth."⁶² The plague "causes" the quarrel no more than Zeus' sending of the dream "causes" the violence in Book 2. Both divine interventions only crystallize a violence already latent inside the human community.

What brings Achilles and Agamemnon into conflict might fairly be called "mimetic desire"—the rivalry over captive women whose possession is supposed to confer prestige, Being in its purest attainable form.⁶³ There is then an erasure of differences in the quarrel (Achilles challenges Agamemnon's royal claim to the greater share of the booty), in Agamemnon's behavior in Book 2 and the rush to the ships (both of which erase his superiority), and in Thersites' defiance, a transgression of rank discussed above as a comic relaxation of rules.⁶⁴ Reciprocal violence occurs in several forms. In Book 1 Agamemnon must surrender Chryseis, his prize, and that is, or seems to him, an injury because it diminishes his *time* or standing. In compensation, he demands the prize of another chief, it does not matter whose (1.135–39). He finally fixes on Achilles because it is Achilles who has opposed him angrily (we note the arbitrary selection). There is now a new and symmetrical imbalance. After he considers killing Agamemnon and is restrained by Athena, Achilles attacks the king verbally (cf. 1.210–11) and then retaliates by inflicting a compensating lack—of himself in battle. With the help of Zeus he thereby assures the army's defeat and the deaths of many Achaeans (cf. 1.3–5)—the continuation of the plague in another form (hence, perhaps, Athena's intervention, the counterpart of Apollo sending the plague). In Book 2 we have Odysseus' use of the sceptre on the soldiers, the possibility that their resentment could explode into action, the violence of Thersites' language against Agamemnon (see especially 2.241–42), and his beating by Odysseus. All this violence has the mimetic character that Girard emphasizes.⁶⁵

The sacrificial crisis is marked as such by the failure of sacrifice to channel violence into ritually "pure" forms. In Book 1, the Achaeans' purification of themselves and propitiation of Apollo (1.312–17, 446–74) frame the taking of Briseis from Achilles and Achilles' scene with Thetis, which will lead to the

⁶¹ Of course, the chain of events need not have developed if Agamemnon had ransomed Chryseis to her father, as the other Achaeans wished (1.22–23). In Girard's terms, his reason for refusal would have to do with "mimetic desire."

⁶² Girard 69.

⁶³ Cf. Girard 148: "Violent opposition...is the signifier of ultimate desire, of divine self-sufficiency, of that 'beautiful totality' whose beauty depends on its being inaccessible and impenetrable." Cf. his discussion of *kudos* (pp. 151–53)—one of his few references to Homer—especially: "the epithet *kudros* signifies an attitude of triumphant majesty, a demeanor characteristic of the gods. Man can enjoy this condition only fleetingly, and *always at the expense of other men.*"

⁶⁴ Girard does not treat comedy directly, but cf. his comments on the festival, pp. 119–20.

⁶⁵ Girard 31.

"plan of Zeus."⁶⁶ Sacrifice, which appeases Apollo's *menis* (1.75), cannot cope with Achilles' *menis* (1.488), cannot project violence outside the community (cf. 1.342–44).

Then in Book 2 violence is focused on a single person, Thersites, whose marginal status allows him to be perceived as different and who yet bears enough similarities to both leaders and soldiers for him to serve as the double of all the rest. He is beaten and then expelled from the group by ridicule.⁶⁷ Difference is then reasserted in the form of military and social rank, and then, after another sacrifice intended this time to commemorate the restoration of order and unanimity (2.402–18), the Achaeans are ready to direct violence outward against the Trojans.⁶⁸

Thersites is not the only scapegoat in the poem. It is well known that the scene on Olympus at the end of Book 1 looks back to, and in its result contrasts with, the earlier Achaean assembly with the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. But it also looks ahead to the scene that immediately follows it in the first half of Book 2. An argument breaks out between Zeus and Hera, and Hera is silenced when Zeus threatens violence (1.565–69). The other gods, however, are indignant (ὄχθησαν, 1.570). As later in Book 2, reciprocal violence with erasure of differences could break out. At this point Hephaestus intervenes, rebuking his parents for arguing and disrupting the banquet. Hephaestus resembles Thersites and plays a similar role. He is set apart from the other gods: as a craftsman, he seems to be of inferior station,⁶⁹ and like Thersites he is deformed in his legs. Unlike Thersites, he does not defy authority; instead, he urges Hera to submit to it. But the effect is the same. Seeing him limping busily to fill their wine-cups, the gods break out into "quenchless laughter" (1.599–600)—and thus discharge the tensions onto him. There is no actual expulsion, and the scapegoat mechanism is muted. But although this scene has none of the nastiness of the Thersites episode, something less genial peeps through. Hephaestus reminds Hera of another occasion on which he intervened in a quarrel between herself and Zeus, when actual violence, threatened against her, was diverted onto him. Zeus threw him from the top of Olympus and he fell all the way to Lemnos (1.586–94). The present scene is thus a more restrained reenactment of that earlier incident. Evidently the scapegoat mechanism is projected onto the gods to validate its use among mortals, in a way unanticipated by Girard but not incompatible with his theory. In any case, this scene acts as a bridge between the two scenes of human conflict in Books 1 and 2.

Let us return to the relation between those two scenes. Achilles has been absent from the resolution of tensions in Book 2, and the use of Thersites as a

⁶⁶ Note especially the attempt to expel impurity into the sea as though it were a physical object (λύματα, 1.314). Conversely, the plague attacks first animals and then humans (1.50–52)—a transition from "pure" to "impure" violence that seems to mark the failure of sacrifice.

⁶⁷ On this function of ridicule, see Girard 254.

⁶⁸ Cf. Girard on "foreign" wars, pp. 249 (where he mentions the story of Troy and other mythic narratives), 279–80.

⁶⁹ Cf. Finley (above, note 5) 72.

scapegoat has done nothing about the problem of his wrath. Nor has the sacrifice at the end of that episode been efficacious (2.419–20). Can these facts be related to the scapegoat theory? We have seen that Achilles and Thersites are each other's tragic and comic double respectively. The link between them may be even closer. Perhaps Achilles is a tragic, as Thersites is a comic, scapegoat. To work out this suggestion in detail would require a reading of the whole *Iliad*, impossible here. Briefly, however, the violence endemic to the community, concentrated in Achilles by his wrath, radiates out from him so that it eventually implicates the whole cosmos, human and divine, in Books 20–21. In the end, it comes down on his own head: he loses Patroclus and ensures his own death by killing Hector. The scapegoat mechanism does its work, however, since after he and Agamemnon settle their quarrel in the wake of Patroclus' death the Achaean army no longer has to suffer the consequences of his wrath. Regarded in this way, Achilles would then appear, not as a transcendent hero who surpasses social categories, but as one deeply involved in the contradictions of his society. Thersites thus performs a clarifying function. As an Achilles stripped of his monumental qualities, he helps us see what we might otherwise miss, the typical scapegoat pattern that Achilles' story follows in a more complex way.

It will be noticed that I have come, from a different direction, to lay the same stress on violence in the *Iliad* as Simone Weil does.⁷⁰ There is much that her analysis, and mine so far, leaves out—for example, the courage and humaneness displayed so often by Homeric heroes. It is not true, ultimately, that violence brutalizes human beings in this poem, though it constantly threatens to do so. But we should recognize the connection between the qualities we associate with the heroic standards and violence. They are a response to violence, and help to contain it as the scapegoat mechanism does in another way. Thus they exist because of violence, as Girard says all cultural forms do. More generally, the aristocratic warrior class exists and enjoys its privileges because it protects society from external violence and exercises violence in the socially legitimate setting of the battlefield. Those very privileges, however, also create inner tensions that constantly threaten violence in turn.

But it is precisely this last point that Girard explicitly denies.⁷¹ One of the disturbing things about his book is that it makes a straightforward opposition between the sacrificial crisis, with its reciprocal violence, and order, without attending to the price that order exacts. The most rigid hierarchical order comes to seem justifiable as a necessary barrier against chaos. But "order" is in some respects a beguiling euphemism for social inequality (and is therefore, in this usage, ideological). It seems incredible that there should be no connection among social structures, the ideology that justifies and sustains them, and violence.⁷² If the Thersites scene (and much else in the *Iliad*) can be read in Girardian terms, it

⁷⁰ Simone Weil, *The Iliad: Or, the Poem of Force*, trans. Mary McCarthy, (Wallingford, Pa. 1957).

⁷¹ Girard 50. Cf. 236–37, 282.

⁷² A revealing weakness in Girard's argument is that he never says what causes the sacrificial crisis in the first place.

also reveals the need for a critique of Girard by suggesting a twofold paradox. Violence can arise from the very institutions meant to safeguard order, especially on those occasions of stress when the disguise provided by ideology is ineffective. And order can indeed be restored through the scapegoat mechanism—but only when the lower ranks are induced to accept authority by the effects of force, ideology, or a combination of the two. This can never be a permanent solution, since institutions will again generate tensions.

We can say, then, that scapegoating functions within ideology and serves ideological ends (and that Girard, who analyzes the ideological character of sacrifice, fails to carry out the same operation fully on the scapegoat and stays within the ideology of hierarchical order). What Girard's theory lets us see with some precision in the Thersites scene is therefore one specific way in which ideology works in defence of the established order at a moment of crisis. This process complements the words of Odysseus when he stops the army's stampede, with their similar ideological character.

V

I have discussed the Thersites scene from a point of view external to the text and removed from it by many centuries. How would it have fit into the context of the eighth century B.C.? How would it have presented itself to that most elusive entity, the *Iliad's* "original audience," who also would have experienced the text from a position outside it? We have so little evidence that we can only lay out possibilities, but the attempt may help clarify the relation among the text, its contemporary audience, and the modern reader.

The Thersites scene has been thought to reflect social issues of the end of the Mycenaean age,⁷³ the *Iliad's* own time,⁷⁴ or both.⁷⁵ I agree with the argument that a purely antiquarian Homer would not have held his audience, that no matter how old were the traditions on which he drew, his poems must have borne *some* relation, however complex or indirect, to contemporary problems.⁷⁶ Slender though the evidence is, it is clear enough that the eighth and seventh centuries were a time of transition and even crisis, and in particular that when the *Iliad* was composed the principle of "one ruler" was coming increasingly into question. By the end of the eighth century, kings were disappearing from most parts of Greece, and power was falling into the hands of an already existing or newly emerging aristocracy.⁷⁷ In at least some places the behavior of

⁷³ Kirk (above, note 3) 22, 382.

⁷⁴ Wilamowitz, *Die Ilias und Homer* (2nd ed., Berlin 1920) 271–72; Andreev (above, note 7) 282, 291; Forrest (above, note 7) 62–64.

⁷⁵ Rankin (above, note 3) 51–54.

⁷⁶ This is argued plausibly, with a balanced discussion of the problems, by Peter W. Rose, "Class Ambivalence in the *Odyssey*," *Historia* 24 (1975) 129–32. It is, of course, impossible to gain from the *Iliad* an accurate and detailed knowledge of contemporary social conditions and conflicts if it is true that a literary text is itself involved in ideological struggles.

⁷⁷ See John V. A. Fine, *The Ancient Greeks: A Critical History* (Cambridge, Mass. 1983) 53–56; Chester G. Starr, "The Decline of the Early Greek Kings," *Historia* 10 (1961) 129–38.

aristocrats gave rise to discontent among the common people, which has been thought by some to be reflected in the *Odyssey*.⁷⁸ Political, social, and economic conditions were changing, and along with them the conception of the individual's relation to the community.⁷⁹ The contradictions exposed by the struggles that such changes bring are reflected in contradictory uses of language. Peter Rose has argued that this is the case in the *Iliad* even with regard to formulae that might once have validated the traditional social order.⁸⁰

The question then is how the *Iliad*, as part of an ideological process, combines these elements, and how this combination might have appeared to an audience who were living such conflicts. It would be possible to say that, with the beating and silencing of Thersites, the text constructs an ideal solution to ideological conflicts from a definite position within ideology (essentially that of the dominant class), which it helps to reproduce in the audience. The effect of the events leading up to that resolution, which undercut it, could then be explained as a textual dissonance, a sign of the contradiction between rival ideologies which are "produced" by the text in its particular historical moment. The text, that is, portrays a challenge to authority (itself ideological) and then a resolution (suppression of the challenge, restoration of authority). But it also, unavoidably, shows how that resolution is attained, and by this process the validity of the outcome, as a solution to an ideological problem, is put into question. Neither poet nor audience can have been aware of this dissonance, but the text yields its secret to the (modern) *critic*, who is thus able to see the contours of the ideology at work in it.⁸¹

This position has considerable advantages. It returns us to the traditional evaluation of the Thersites scene, in the version represented here by de Ste. Croix, but with a decisive difference. It allows recognition of the full complexities of the Thersites scene, rather than glossing over them. And it avoids the "familiar forms of historicism which regard the work as the 'expression' of a 'world view' which in turn expresses a privileged 'class position' occupied by the individual or 'trans-individual' author at a particular historical point"—a conception that "merely dissolves the materiality of the text to the transparency of historical 'consciousness' or 'praxis.'"⁸²

In this case, however, the result of such a theory would be to collapse the distance between the audience and the characters in the narrative. Yet that dis-

⁷⁸ Rose (above, note 76); S. G. Farron, "The *Odyssey* as an Anti-Aristocratic Statement," *Studies in Antiquity* 1 (1979-80) 59-101. Walter Donlan sees the Thersites episode as the first extant example of a thread of anti-aristocratic sentiment in the poetic tradition: "The Tradition of Anti-Aristocratic Thought in Early Greek Poetry," *Historia* 22 (1973) 145-54 (especially 150-51). He seems to read the episode, however, as expressing aristocratic reaction against it.

⁷⁹ For an excellent short summary, see S. Nimis, "The Language of Achilles: Construction vs. Representation," *CW* 79 (1986) 223-24.

⁸⁰ Peter Rose, "How Conservative is the *Iliad*?" *Pacific Coast Philology* 13 (1978) 86-93. Cf. Nimis (above, note 79) 222.

⁸¹ This paragraph is based on Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London 1976) 64-101.

⁸² Eagleton (above, note 81) 166.

tance should be insisted on, along with the audience's probable diversity. Its members would have responded to the Thersites scene in different ways (no doubt along ideological lines). Some may well have admired Odysseus' conduct and shared his indignation at Thersites; others might have felt very differently. It seems improbable that the narrative context of the Thersites scene—the ironies, the contradictions in the leaders' behavior, the symbolism of the sceptre—would not have shaped the perspective of a considerable part of the audience at some, perhaps not fully conscious, level. It might be left to the critic to work out systematically the contradictions in the text between justifications of authority and the way it is actually exercised, but these surely can have influenced the audience's responses.

If we bear in mind that early Greek epic was publicly performed and thus occupied a central position in its society, we can appreciate, at least in a general way, that the *Iliad* was part of complicated social transactions in a period of crisis. Its text should be seen neither as a neutral ground for the play of rival ideologies nor as the ideological weapon of a dominant class. It is deeply involved in ideology, but in a complex way that is reflected, in part, by the failure of the Thersites scene to attain genuine closure.⁸³ As an ordering of conflicts into a constructed artifice, it reproduces, but in some degree helps to clarify, the indeterminacies of lived experience.⁸⁴

⁸³ If "...the *Iliad* does not *represent* a social crisis from some privileged perspective outside of the struggle, but is an attempt to *construct* a resolution in the realm of ideology itself" (Nimis, above, note 79, 222), the Thersites scene might point toward the need for such a resolution (whatever the actual success of the poem as a whole in constructing one).

⁸⁴ Versions of this paper were given at the September, 1986 meeting of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States at Columbia University, at the University of Southern California, Colby College, and Cornell University. I would like to thank the members of the audiences on those occasions for their encouragement and their equally invigorating disagreements. Special thanks are due to those who read drafts of the paper and gave very helpful comments: my colleagues Vincent Farenga and Carolyn Dewald, the Editor of *TAPA*, and Anthony Edwards.