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Penthesileia, That Vulnerable Heel of the Iliadic Achilles

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Abstract: Neoanalysis long ago employed a “source-and-recipient model” to claim that the conflict scene between Thersites and Odysseus in *Iliad* 2 is composed of elements taken from an identifiable context in the *Aethiopis*, the Achilles-Penthesileia episode. However, though highly suggestive, this approach, in focusing on specific intertextual echoes, misses the larger dialogue between the *Iliad* and the *Aethiopis* and the reciprocal and complex dynamics in play between them. This paper, revisiting all the available evidence, proposes a specific cross-reference between the *Iliad* and the Aethiopic tradition in which Homer uses the figure of Thersites as part of a sophisticated and self-reflexive type of poetic interaction that includes both compliance and contestation with the wider epic tradition.

Keywords: Homer, *Iliad*, Epic Cycle, *Aethiopis*, Achilles, Thersites, Penthesileia, poetic composition, poetic competition.

The first book of the *Iliad* is dominated by the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, which culminates in the latter’s withdrawal from active participation. In the *Diapheira* or “Testing” episode of *Iliad* 2, however, Agamemnon’s problems are compounded by his near-disastrous decision to test the resolve of the Greek army, when the flight to the ships is only prevented by the intervention of Odysseus. It is at this moment that the ambivalent figure of Thersites – the only Achaean who refuses to submit to Odysseus’ command –¹ enters the narrative in a markedly unusual scene (*Il.* 2.211–278), full of conspicuous ambiguity and pronounced complexities, which have long drawn scholarly interest.² As has been aptly said, “everyone’s task, whether in the ranks at Troy or in academia, would be easier if Thersites had never opened his mouth.”³

Thersites makes an entertaining cameo appearance that owes much to the perceived mismatch between his lowly stature and the grandiose style of the epic in which he appears. In fact, the Homeric narrator introduces him in

* I would like to thank the editors of *Museum Helveticum* for their useful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ Thersites has a suitable speaking name deriving from the Aeolic θέρσος (= Ionic θάρσος), which means both “courage” and “audacity” and is here probably used pejoratively in the latter of these senses to imply “impudence”; cf. G. S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Books 1–4* (Cambridge 1985) 138 on *Il.* 2.212.

² For a useful overview and further bibliography, see J. Marks, “The Ongoing νεῖκος: Thersites, Odysseus, and Achilleus”, *AJPh* 126 (2005) 1–6.

³ E. Lowry, *Thersites: A Study in Comic Shame* (New York 1991) 3.

highly unfavourable terms, essentially depicting him, from the very outset, as being “everything a hero is not”⁴ (*Il.* 2.211–224):

- ἄλλοι μὲν ῥ' ἔζοντο, ἐρήτυθεν δὲ καθ' ἔδρας·
 Θερσίτης δ' ἔτι μούνοσ' ἀμετροεπὴς ἐκολώϊα,
 ὃς ἔπεα φρεσὶν ἦισιν ἄκοσμά τε πολλὰ τε εἶδη,
 μάψ, ἀτὰρ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, ἐριζέμεναι βασιλεῦσιν,
 215 ἄλλ' ὃ τι οἱ εἴσαιτο γελοῖον Ἀργείοισιν
 ἔμμεναι. αἰσχιστος δὲ ἀνὴρ ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθεν·
 φορκὸς ἔην, χλωὸς δ' ἕτερον πόδα, τῷ δέ οἱ ὦμῳ
 κυρτῷ, ἐπὶ στήθος συνοκωχότε· αὐτὰρ ὑπερθεῖν
 φοξὸς ἔην κεφαλὴν, ψεδνὴ δ' ἐπενήνοθε λάχνη.
 220 ἔχθιστος δ' Ἀχιλῆϊ μάλιστ' ἦν ἡδ' Ὀδυσῆϊ·
 τῷ γὰρ νεικείεσκε, τότ' αὖτ' Ἀγαμέμνονι δίῳι
 ὀξέα κεκληγὼς λέγ' ὀνειδέα· τῷ δ' ἄρ' Ἀχαιοί
 ἐκπάγλως κοτέοντο νεμέσσηθέν τ' ἐνὶ θυμῷ.
 αὐτὰρ ὁ μακρὰ βοῶν Ἀγαμέμνονα νείκεε μύθῳι.

Now the others sat down and were restrained in their places,
 only there still kept chattering on Thersites of measureless speech,
 whose mind was full of great store of disorderly words,
 with which to revile the kings, recklessly and in no due order,
 but whatever he thought would raise a laugh among the Argives.
 Ugly was he beyond all men who came to Ilion:
 he was bandy-legged and lame in one foot, and his shoulders
 were rounded, hunching together over his chest, and above them
 his head was pointed, and a scant stubble grew on it.
 Hateful was he to Achilles above all, and to Odysseus,
 for those two he was in the habit of reviling; but now with shrill cries
 he uttered abuse against noble Agamemnon. With him
 were the Argives exceedingly angry, and indignant in their hearts.
 But shouting loudly he reviled Agamemnon.⁵

Depriving Thersites of both patronymic and homeland, the narrator begins with a brief analysis of the man's poor rhetorical competence (212–214)⁶ and then moves on to label him not only the ugliest of all Greeks who came to Troy (216–219) but also the most unwelcome (220–223). Here, attention is somewhat mysteriously drawn to the fact that he was the most hateful to both Achilles in particular and Odysseus, whom he constantly reviled (220–221). Odysseus' hatred

⁴ N. Postlethwaite, “Thersites in the *Iliad*”, *G&R* 35.2 (1988) 125.

⁵ In this paper, the Greek text of the *Iliad* is based on M. L. West (ed.), *Homeri Ilias*, vol. I–II (Stuttgart and Leipzig 1998–2000), and the English translation on A. T. Murray (ed. and trans.), *Homer: The Iliad*, 2 vols. (2nd ed., rev. by W. F. Wyatt, Cambridge, MA and London 1999).

⁶ The οὐ κατὰ κόσμον speech of Thersites in *Il.* 2.214 (cf. ἄκοσμα in line 213) makes a strong and interesting contrast with the κατὰ κόσμον performance of the good singer in *Od.* 8.489, on which see I. Lambrou, “Homer and the Epic Cycle: Dialogue and Challenge” (Ph.D. Diss., University College London, 2015) 49–50.

points proleptically to the confrontation that the hero will have with Thersites later in this episode.⁷ But where does Achilles' enmity originate from? And what reasons lie behind Homer's choice to omit any further reference to the matter beyond this elusive innuendo? These are some fundamental questions that this paper seeks to address.

It is true that the contemptuous reception given to Thersites by the narrator conflicts strikingly with his ensuing speech (*Il.* 2.225–242):

- 225 Ἀτρείδῃ, τέο δὴ αὖτ' ἐπιμέμφει ἡδὲ χατίζεις;
 πλεῖαί τοι χαλκοῦ κλισίαι, πολλαὶ δὲ γυναῖκες
 εἴσιν ἐνὶ κλισίῃς ἐξαίρετοι, ἅς τοι Ἀχαιοί
 πρωτίστῳ δίδομεν, εὖτ' ἂν πτολίεθρον ἔλωμεν.
 ἢ ἔτι καὶ χρυσοῦ ἐπιδευέαι, ὃν κέ τις οἴσει
 230 Τρώων ἵπποδάμων ἐξ Ἰλίου υἱὸς ἄποινα
 ὃν κεν ἐγὼ δήσας ἀγάγω ἢ ἄλλος Ἀχαιῶν,
 ἢ γυναιῖκα νέην, ἵνα μίσγεται ἐν φιλότῃτι,
 ἣν τ' αὐτὸς ἀπὸ νόσφι κατίσχει; οὐ μὲν ἔοικεν
 ἀρχὸν ἐόντα κακῶν ἐπιβασκόμεν υἱᾶς Ἀχαιῶν.
 235 ὦ πέπονες, κάκ' ἐλέγχε', Ἀχαιῖδες, οὐκέτ' Ἀχαιοί,
 οἴκαδ' περ σὺν νηυσὶ νεώμεθα, τόνδε δ' ἐῷμεν
 αὐτοῦ ἐνὶ Τροίῃ γέρα πεσσέμεν, ὄφρα ἴδῃται
 ἢ ῥά τί οἱ χήμεῖς προσαμύνομεν, ἦ καὶ οὐκί-
 ὃς καὶ νῦν Ἀχιλῆα, ἔο μέγ' ἀμείνονα φῶτα,
 240 ἠτίμησεν· ἐλὼν γὰρ ἔχει γέρας αὐτὸς ἀπούρας.
 ἀλλὰ μάλ' οὐκ Ἀχιλῆϊ χόλος φρεσὶν, ἀλλὰ μεθίμων·
 ἢ γὰρ ἂν, Ἀτρείδῃ, νῦν ὕστατα λωβήσαιο.

Son of Atreus, what are you unhappy about this time, or what do you lack?
 Your huts are filled with bronze, and there are many women
 in your huts, chosen spoils that we Achaeans
 give you first of all, whenever we take a city.
 Or do you still want gold also, which one of the horse-taming Trojans
 will bring you out of Ilion as a ransom for his son,
 whom I perhaps have bound and led away or some other of the Achaeans?
 Or is it some young girl for you to know in love,
 whom you will keep apart for yourself? It is not right
 for one who is their leader to bring the sons of the Achaeans harm.
 Soft fools! Base things of shame, you women of Achaea, men no more,
 homeward let us go with our ships, and leave this fellow
 here in the land of Troy to digest his prizes, so that he may learn
 whether we, too, aid him in any way or not –
 he who has now done dishonour to Achilles, a man far better than he;
 for he has taken away and keeps his prize by his arrogant act.
 But surely there is no wrath in the heart of Achilles, but he is complacent;
 for otherwise, son of Atreus, you would now be committing your last act of insolence.

7 Cf. J. Latacz et al., *Homers Ilias. Gesamtkommentar. Band II: 2. Gesang; Fasz. 2: Kommentar* (Munich and Leipzig 2003) 74 on *Il.* 2.220.

Thersites criticises Agamemnon for being greedy (225–234), and on this basis he urges the Greeks to stop fighting and to set sail for home (235–238), invoking the injustice done to Achilles by reiterating Achilles' complaint in *Il.* 1.163–168 (cf. *Il.* 9.331–333) that Agamemnon receives the majority of the available τιμή though he is inferior as a warrior (239–242).⁸ So, as has been rightly pointed out, in marked contrast to his unfavourable introductory portrayal, which undoubtedly prepares the audience for a nonsensical speech, “Thersites is given some telling points to make against the army's royal leadership, even if his speech is ridiculed, and even if in its policy and composition it did not reach standards of parliament eloquence.”⁹ Most obtrusively striking, however, is Thersites' expressed sympathy for Achilles. He conspicuously takes the hero's side in his quarrel with Agamemnon and appears to be a fervent proponent of his demand to be honoured as an individual, but this glaringly contradicts the narrator's earlier reference to continuous enmity between the two.

An equally enigmatic conundrum arises as to whether in the person of Thersites Odysseus chastises a person of equal rank (peer) or a commoner. As Thersites claims in line 231, he has himself taken Trojan prisoners for ransom, and this presumably points to his high status as an individual warrior.¹⁰ It has been argued that this evidence is not enough to conclude that Thersites makes this claim as an *aristos*, on the grounds that “nowhere else in the ancient Greek epic is a character denied the opportunity to engage in these activities because of low ranking.”¹¹ The emphatic use, however, of the first-person pronoun ἐγώ in line 231¹² suggestively presents Thersites as a distinguished warrior, especially since no other common soldier in the *Iliad* ever performs any heroic deed as an individual. Besides, capture for ransom in the *Iliad* is reserved, as has been rightly pointed out,¹³ for the front fighters or (named) nobility, and the poem mainly foregrounds the practice as Achilles' pre-Iliadic preoccupation.¹⁴ Thersites, therefore, by drawing attention to his involvement and significant role in such activities, invites us to see him as a warrior of the first rank.¹⁵ Yet, as we shall see below, it does appear that Odysseus treats Thersites as a man of the “people” (δῆμος).

⁸ For a thorough discussion of the similarities between Thersites' speech to Agamemnon and the speeches of Achilles and Agamemnon in *Iliad* 1, see Postlethwaite, *loc. cit.* (n. 4) 126–132.

⁹ H. D. Rankin, “Thersites the Malcontent. A Discussion”, *SOslo* 47 (1972) 39; cf. A. Kouklanakis, “Thersites, Odysseus, and the Social Order”, in M. Carlisle/O. Levaniouk (eds.), *Nine Essays on Homer* (Lanham, Md and Oxford 1999) 42–45.

¹⁰ Cf. Kirk, *loc. cit.* (n. 1) 138–139 on *Il.* 2.212.

¹¹ Marks, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 2 n. 2.

¹² Note, also, the first person of δίδομεν and ἔλωμεν in *Il.* 2.228.

¹³ See Kirk, *loc. cit.* (n. 1) 138–139 on *Il.* 2.212.

¹⁴ See Lambrou, *loc. cit.* (n. 6) 121–123.

¹⁵ On sources outside Homer that present Thersites as an Aetolian noble, see discussion later in this paper.

Agamemnon's decision to test the morale and loyalty of his troops by telling them to leave the battlefield and return home results in chaos. The Achaeans immediately rush to the ships to prepare for departure, when Odysseus, prompted by Athena, takes hold of Agamemnon's scepter as a sign of authority and attempts to discipline and restrain them from fleeing (*Il.* 2.185–206). The way Odysseus treats the Achaeans is suggestively associated with their status. He gently reminds the kings and noble men of their duty to stand fast and hold their people back (188–197), whereas he disciplines the common soldiers sharply by rebuking them for not obeying the authority of the kings and striking them with the scepter (198–206), which is precisely what he does with Thersites, beating him till he weeps from shame (*Il.* 2.243–270). Thersites' public humiliation through physical punishment has no parallel in the *Iliad*,¹⁶ but the beating of the man cannot in itself be taken to firmly demonstrate that he is of low rank. The reason is that fierce quarrels among men of the same rank are not an uncommon phenomenon in Homer, and, as has been rightly pointed out, "if elite competition in the Homeric epics does not normally rise to the level of open violence, the possibility of such violence is nevertheless entertained in a variety of contexts."¹⁷ The most prominent example, of course, is that of Achilles, who comes close to killing Agamemnon merely for an affront to his honour.¹⁸ In this particular sequence of events, however, in a context in which Thersites, denied of patronymic and homeland, is clearly shown as being disciplined the way "people" are, it quickly becomes evident that his punishment is pointedly intended to be understood as punishment of a common soldier; this coheres with the overwhelming emphasis that the *Iliad* places on his physical obnoxiousness. Although no other character in the Homeric epics is denied high status because of his ugliness,¹⁹ Thersites is conspicuously given an exceptionally extensive and meticulously unfavourable description, which invites us to think that he is lower in status in comparison with other named individuals. Besides, Odysseus warns him that, if he exhibits such foolishness again, he will strip him of his clothing and whip him naked and blubbering down to the ships (258–264). One could hardly see in the place of Thersites a king or a man of importance, all the more so since Odysseus, addressing his fellow captains earlier, claims that it would not be appropriate for him to intimidate men of equal rank (190).

¹⁶ The only comparable figure is the Oilean Ajax at the funeral games of Patroclus: see esp. *Il.* 23.774–777, where Athena helps Odysseus win the footrace by making Ajax slip and fall in some cow dung. But again, Ajax is not ridiculed in these terms.

¹⁷ Marks, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 16.

¹⁸ Cf., e.g., the Oileian Ajax and Idomeneus in *Il.* 23.448–498; Odysseus and Eurylochus in *Od.* 10.428–448.

¹⁹ Two notable examples are the Trojan Dolon (*Il.* 10.316) and Odysseus' herald Eurybates (*Od.* 19.246), on which see Marks, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 4.

For all their disaffection, the soldiers laugh happily and hail Odysseus' ultimate humiliation of Thersites, who becomes something of a scapegoat, carrying off the bad feelings of the army (*Il.* 2.270–278). Their laughter virtually discharges the tension at a critical point of political turbulence, so Thersites may well be seen as the third party that “offers an outlet in pleasant laughter for the divisive tensions in this dangerously polarized situation.”²⁰ The fact in itself, however, cannot be taken as positive proof of Thersites' low rank: similarly, all laugh happily at the lesser Ajax, whose mouth and nostrils are filled with cow-dung when Athena fouls him in the footrace (*Il.* 23.784); laughter at Hephaestus displaces the quarrel that erupts because of Hera's resentment at Zeus' meeting with Thetis (*Il.* 1.599–600);²¹ Zeus laughs gently when Artemis, beaten by Hera in the battle of the gods, turns crying to him (*Il.* 21.507–508). Thus, the crowd's laughter is in no way indicative of Thersites' status.²² Whether noble or commoner, however, Thersites is undoubtedly regarded with disfavour by the troops. Although he passionately advocates departure from Troy, he evidently does not find favour with the mass of the Achaeans, who find his debasement amusing and readily approve of his humiliating chastisement at the hands of Odysseus (see especially lines 272–277). As has been aptly said, Thersites “is represented as intending to speak ostensibly on behalf of the army, but as being rejected by his peers in the army.”²³

The discussion so far has designated the salient complexities embedded in this scene. Thersites, though being said to be the most hateful to Achilles, appears noticeably to be his most fervent supporter among the Achaeans; and, though he speaks the language of truth, everyone in the army rejects him, even the Homeric narrator. What is more, his status turns out to be markedly elusive. The question of whether he is a member of the elite or a commoner has been much debated,²⁴ but all the assumptions offered, in seeking to provide one single answer to this question, fail to appreciate the one undeniable fact that his status remains, as we have seen, not only unstated but also conspicuously ambiguous, as Homer indicates his status differently at different points. Is there, in fact, a good way to explain these complexities in their entirety? The wider epic tradition, as we shall see, does seem to be able to provide us with a good answer.

²⁰ W. G. Thalmann, “Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology in the *Iliad*”, *TAPA* 118 (1988) 18; cf. Kouklanakis, *loc. cit.* (n. 9) 39.

²¹ B. Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago 1994) 30–32 draws a comparison between Thersites and Hephaestus; cf. Thalmann, *loc. cit.* (n. 20) 24.

²² On laughter in the *Iliad*, see R. H. Bell, “Homer's Humor: Laughter in the *Iliad*”, *Humanitas* 20 (2007) 96–116; S. Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study in Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge 2008) 51–99.

²³ Rankin, *loc. cit.* (n. 9) 43.

²⁴ For bibliography, see Marks, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 2 n. 1.

The only other known epic episode outside Homer involving Thersites, Achilles, and Odysseus forms part of the tradition that is now reflected in the lost *Aethiopis*, one of the archaic epic poems from which the so-called Epic Cycle was made up.²⁵ The *Chrestomatheia* of Proclus²⁶ gives us an outline of the story:

Ἀμαζῶν Πενθεσίλεια παραγίνεται Τρωσὶ συμμαχήσουσα, Ἄρεως μὲν θυγάτηρ, Θραϊσσα δὲ τὸ γένος, καὶ κτείνει αὐτὴν ἀριστεύουσαν Ἀχιλλεύς, οἱ δὲ Τρῶες αὐτὴν θάπτουσι. καὶ Ἀχιλλεύς Θερσίτην ἀναιρεῖ λοιδορηθεὶς πρὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ ὄνειδισθεὶς τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ Πενθεσίλειαι λεγόμενον ἔρωτα. καὶ ἐκ τούτου στάσις γίνεται τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖς περὶ τοῦ Θερσίτου φόνου. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα Ἀχιλλεύς εἰς Λέσβον πλεῖ, καὶ θύσας Ἀπόλλωνι καὶ Ἀρτέμιδι καὶ Λητοῖ καθαίρεται τοῦ φόνου ὑπ' Ὀδυσσεώς.

The Amazon Penthesileia arrives to fight with the Trojans, a daughter of the War god, of Thracian stock. She dominates the battlefield, but Achilles kills her and the Trojans bury her. And Achilles kills Thersites after being abused by him and insulted over his alleged love for Penthesileia. This results in a dispute among the Achaeans about the killing of Thersites. Achilles then sails to Lesbos, and after sacrificing to Apollo, Artemis, and Leto, he is purified from the killing by Odysseus.²⁷

According to Proclus, Achilles and Thersites come into fatal conflict over Penthesileia, the Amazon queen and ally of the Trojans: Thersites reviles and sneers at Achilles' "love" (*eros*) towards the dead Amazon, thereby provoking the hero to kill him. The murder of Thersites results in a (presumably violent) dispute (*stasis*) among the Greeks, which probably compels the hero to flee to Lesbos, where Odysseus purifies him after sacrifice to the gods. Such as it is, however, the sum-

²⁵ For an overview of the studies on the formation of the Epic Cycle and the different stages in its evolution, see M. Fantuzzi/C. Tsagalis (eds.), *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception. A Companion* (Cambridge 2015) 7–40. For thorough discussions of the *Aethiopis* and further bibliography, see A. Rengakos, "Aethiopis", in the same companion, at 306–317; M. L. West, *The Epic Cycle: A Commentary on the Lost Troy Epics* (Oxford 2013) 129–162; M. Davies, *The Aethiopis: Neo-Neanalysis Reanalyzed* (Washington, DC 2016). The authorship and date of the *Aethiopis* are far from certain: see Rengakos at 313–314. However, there is now broad consensus that the Cyclic epics including the *Aethiopis* developed in oral performances in the Archaic Age deriving their material from long-standing oral mythopoetic traditions and were crystallised in a written form by the end of this period: see, e.g., J. S. Burgess, *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle* (Baltimore 2001) 8–12.

²⁶ The *Chrestomatheia* was a four-book systematic review of Greek literature. The full title was Χρηστομαθείας γραμματικῆς ἐκλογαί ("Readings in useful literary knowledge"), but the precise identity of the author remains uncertain. Proclus was either a second-century AD grammarian or the famous fifth-century AD Neoplatonist. For a detailed discussion of the content and authorship of the *Chrestomatheia*, see West, *loc. cit.* (n. 25) 4–11.

²⁷ *Aethiopis* Arg. §1 West = lines 4–10 Bernabé (= Procl. *Chrest.*); cf. [Apollod.], *Epit.* 5.1. Henceforth, all citations, quotations, and translations of testimonies and fragments of the Cyclic epics are by M. L. West (ed. and trans.), *Greek Epic Fragments: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC* (Cambridge, MA and London 2003). Citations are also based on the edition of A. Bernabé (ed.), *Poetarum Epicorum Graecorum Testimonia et Fragmenta*, vol. 1 (Leipzig 1987).

mary prevents us from understanding immediately the essence of the story, namely, whether Achilles actually becomes emotionally involved with Penthesileia²⁸ and why his “love” for her is regarded as blameworthy enough to provoke mockery on the part of Thersites. Here, Quintus Smyrnaeus, a third-century AD (?) epic poet,²⁹ comes to our aid, as he usefully provides a full account of the episode in his *Posthomerica*, a fourteen-book hexameter poem covering the events between the death of Hector and the fall of Troy.

In Quintus, as in the *Aethiopis*, Penthesileia is killed by Achilles while fighting on the side of the Trojans. When the hero removes her helmet, the Greeks gathering round all marvel at the brilliance of her divine beauty (1.657–665),³⁰ and he, too, starts to recognise her attractive qualities (1.666–674): while the Greeks are praying that, when they go back home, they may bring with them a bride similarly beautiful (669–670), Achilles regrets deeply that, by killing Penthesileia, he lost the opportunity to return to Phthia with her as his bride (671–673). The D-scholia on *Il.* 2.119 describe his reaction to the death of Penthesileia in Quintus as love at first sight (ιδὼν τὸ σῶμα αὐτῆς εὐπρεπὲς πάνυ, εἰς ἔρωτα ἦλθε), and rightly so: according to lines 666–668, it was as though Aphrodite had created Penthesileia’s beauty to cause suffering to Achilles. The extent to which the relationship between the Aphrodite-made beauty of Penthesileia and the emotional turbulence of Achilles is described as a cause-and-effect relationship suggests that the hero does become strongly aware of her erotic appeal and regrets that he missed the erotic opportunity.

Achilles’ (thwarted) sexual desire, however, is finally transformed into a profound feeling of human affection for the Amazon. The exposure to her death leads him to intense emotional response (1.716–721): while the Achaeans are eagerly despoiling the corpses strewn around, Achilles sets himself apart and grieves deeply over Penthesileia’s body. His heart is wrung, and her loss becomes a source of deep anguish inside him. In fact, seeing the flawless Amazon lying dead in the dust generates a strong feeling of grief over her *lost strength and beauty* (718–719). The comparison of Achilles’ distress to the poignant sorrow caused to him by the loss of Patroclus is very suggestive (720–721).

28 Note that the exact wording in Proclus is τὸν (...) λεγόμενον ἔρωτα: see discussion further below.

29 Many would disagree with this date. For an overview of the discussion around Quintus’ date, see M. Baumbach/S. Bär (eds.), *Quintus Smyrnaeus: Transforming Homer in Second Sophistic Epic* (Berlin and New York 2007) 1–8.

30 A. James (ed. and trans.), *Quintus of Smyrna. The Trojan Epic: Posthomerica* (Baltimore and London 2004) 273 on 1.657–661 notes that “the revelation of Penthesileia’s beauty by the removal of her helmet is singled out in Propertius’ brief mention of the episode (3.11.15–16), which suggests that it was a traditional feature of the story.” West, *loc. cit.* (n. 25) 141, based on suggestive evidence from early representations of the Amazons, argues that this feature possibly already existed in the *Aethiopis*, supposing further that “when Penthesileia fell, the Trojans will have fled to safety and the Achaeans will have gathered round to admire the body, as they do in *Il.* 22.369 when Hector falls.”

It is at this moment of overwhelming grief that Thersites speaks out against Achilles (1.722–740). He accuses the hero of being such a “womaniser” that he mourns over the death of Penthesileia – a female foe who intended nothing but ill towards the Greeks (725) – as though she were some prudent lady that he could take home as a spouse (726–728); and what is more, he has become so infatuated with her that he has no mind for heroic deeds (731–732), which is the only way for him to gain glory on the battlefield (*kudos* and *kleos*), a warrior’s unremitting goal (739–740). In Thersites’ eyes, therefore, Achilles clearly slackens because of a frivolous caprice, which could become seriously detrimental to his future glory.

Thersites has, of course, some telling points to make regarding Achilles and his erotic weakness. The hero, however, does not defeat the man by any compelling argument but by the fatal application of physical force. He then rejoices over his success (1.757–758): “Lie there in the dust, your follies all forgotten. It’s not for men of the baser kind to challenge their betters.”³¹ Achilles does not bother to explain that his feelings over the death of Penthesileia are profoundly humane, that he does not simply regret that he missed the erotic opportunity, as Thersites believes. He merely restores emphatically the disturbed hierarchical balance: Thersites is brutally punished because he dared to challenge someone much better than him. But the insults that he uttered against Achilles remain unanswered, and his accusations are left reverberating.³² What is more, though exaggerated and grossly inappropriate in expression, his accusation of Achilles’ self-indulgence in succumbing to *eros* on the battlefield was not entirely unfounded; Quintus, as we have seen, depicts Achilles as being genuinely susceptible to both Penthesileia’s female sensuality and human affection, which halted (even if only temporarily) his participation in the fighting. This, of course, raises the question of whether the *Aethiopis* did feature a similar emotional response from Achilles to the sight of the dead Amazon, but, unlike Quintus, the wording in Proclus is not so clear.

Proclus says that in the *Aethiopis* Thersites mocked the λεγόμενος ἔρως of Achilles for the dead Penthesileia. The phrase λεγόμενος ἔρως has a somewhat elusive meaning. Perhaps there were rumours flying around that Achilles had fallen in love with Penthesileia (λεγόμενος ἔρως = “rumoured love”), or the hero was accused of erotic interest in the Amazon queen that was conceived of as such only by Thersites (λεγόμενος ἔρως = “alleged love”). These two interpretations allow for the possibility that Achilles had not actually fallen in love with Penthesileia, but that the story of his “love” for the Amazon was either an unfounded rumour or a flimsy allegation. The phrase λεγόμενος ἔρως, however, may also be rendered as “an emotional response of Achilles which, accord-

31 Trans. James, *loc. cit.* (n. 30) 22.

32 This is also the case with the *Iliad*: see discussion further below.

ing to the understanding of Proclus, was misconceived as *eros* by the intra-textual characters” (λεγόμενος ἔρως = “the so-called love”). Proclus, in other words, may simply dissociate himself from what Thersites, the intra-textual speaker, said in the original *Aethiopis*.³³ He probably uses the word ἔρως because this is what Thersites referred to in his speech, yet he himself believes that the man misrepresented Achilles’ emotional response to the death of Penthesileia: the “love” of Achilles was not as Thersites said.³⁴ Of course, as has been rightly noted, Achilles “must have shown some emotional reaction sufficient to provoke Thersites’ taunts.”³⁵ Based on our evidence from Quintus, however, we can reasonably assume that this emotional response to the sight of the dead Penthesileia (transformed from sensitivity to her extraordinary beauty³⁶ to grief over lost opportunity and finally poignant sorrow for human loss),³⁷ though rightly considered to be in contravention of established heroic values or, at least, contrary to the collective interest of the Greek army, was exaggerated or misunderstood by Thersites as *lustful infatuation*.³⁸ In using

33 Similarly, Proclus begins the introduction to his summary of the Cyclic epic *Cypria* by saying that there follows τὰ λεγόμενα Κύπρια (“the so-called *Cypria*”) and promising a discussion of the title elsewhere, thus casting doubt on its correctness; see *Cypria* Arg. §1 West = lines 1–2 Bernabé (= Procl. *Chrest.*): ἐπιβάλλει τούτοις τὰ λεγόμενα Κύπρια ἐν βιβλίοις φερόμενα ἑνδεκα, ὧν περὶ τῆς γραφῆς ὕστερον ἐροῦμεν, ἵνα μὴ τὸν ἐξῆς λόγον νῦν ἐμποδίζωμεν. (“This is succeeded by the so-called *Cypria*, transmitted in eleven books; we will discuss the spelling of the title later, so as not to obstruct the flow of the present account.”) As can be inferred from *Cypria* Test. 4 West = 7 Bernabé (= Phot., *Bibl.* 319a34), in a section of his *Chrestomatheia* that does not survive, Proclus did claim that the *Cypria* should be read Κυπρία paroxytone, the name of the author Κυπρίας in the genitive, meaning “by (the poet) Kyprias”. For a detailed account of this issue and a discussion of the authorship of the *Cypria*, see West, *loc. cit.* (n. 25) 32–34.

34 Cf. M. Fantuzzi, *Achilles in Love: Intertextual Studies* (Oxford 2012) 275: “The phrase probably means that Thersites called it ἔρως, but Achilles’ actions could not be plainly defined as ἔρως by everyone.”

35 West, *loc. cit.* (n. 25) 141.

36 West, *loc. cit.* (n. 25) 143 draws attention to a similar erotic element in another poem of the Epic Cycle, the *Little Iliad*: “When [Penthesileia’s] face is uncovered, the sight of it melts Achilles and turns his hostile thoughts aside, and when Helen uncovers her bosom in the *Little Iliad* [F 28 West = F 19 Bernabé (= Σ Ar., *Lys.* 155)] the sight of it melts Menelaus and makes him drop his sword.”

37 Cf. Fantuzzi, *loc. cit.* (n. 34) 275: “Achilles might have revealed his instantaneous love simply through the passion of his gaze or his unusually humane handling of the body. Or he might have mourned for her.” Between the sixth century and the first half of the fourth century BC, pictorial representations that show an intense exchange of glances between Achilles and Penthesileia at the very moment of her death may reflect the version of the *Aethiopis*: see Fantuzzi, *loc. cit.* (n. 34) 270–271.

38 There is, of course, a large (and not only) chronological gap between the *Posthomeric* and the early epic tradition. Older and more recent discussions, however, have shown that Quintus is, in fact, in a constant dialogue with both Homer and the early epic tradition: see Baumbach/Bär, *loc. cit.* (n. 29); B. Boyten, “Epic Journeys: Studies in the Reception of the Hero and Heroism in Quintus Smyrnaeus’ *Posthomeric*” (Ph.D. Diss., University College London, 2010); James, *loc. cit.* (n. 30)

the expression λεγόμενος ἔρως, Proclus probably points out the exaggeration and distortion on the part of Thersites.

According to Proclus, moreover, the murder of Thersites in the *Aethiopis* resulted in a “dispute”-*stasis*. If indeed the Aetolian lineage of Thersites that makes him the cousin of Tydeus dates back to the epic tradition,³⁹ then it is possible that Diomedes as Thersites’ closest kinsman relentlessly demanded an explanation for his murder, which brought about direct confrontation with Achilles, as in Quintus 1.767–781, where he draws his sword on the hero, but is restrained by the other leaders.⁴⁰ Such a conflict might account well for the *stasis*-scene in the *Aethiopis*. It is noteworthy, however, that Proclus does not name any particular heroes: στάσις γίνεται τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖς; this does strongly suggest a large-scale dispute among the Achaeans.⁴¹ But again one might see “the Achaeans” as reflections of their various noble leaders rather than as a group of autonomous and anonymous individuals, and then it would, of course, be possible for Diomedes to assume command of a faction in the dispute as Thersites’ closest kinsman.

The heroic ideal, which the *Iliad* so eloquently presents, often sanctions boasts over a dead foe, whose death would benefit all the Achaeans, but rigorously avoids grief for the enemy dead. In the *Aethiopis*, by contrast, Achilles’ emotional involvement in the death of Penthesileia – and his subsequent inactive participation – would endanger not only the safety of his comrades but also his personal glory. That was presumably the accusation that Thersites made, as in Quintus; and the large-scale dispute among the Achaeans, which probably originated in a quarrel about whether Thersites truly deserved the brutal punishment he received, suggests that at least some of the Greeks did in fact share the same point of view.⁴² It is not inconceivable, of course, that the controversy also revolved around the appropriate punishment for Achilles. According to Proclus, the hero was eventually banished from the army for the killing of Thersites and returned to the battlefield only when he was freed from the defilement through purification. The need for purification, however, arguably prevented him even further from participating actively in the war, especially at that very critical point when Memnon, the Aethiopian king, came

267–268; Ph. I. Kakridis, *Kointos Smyrnaios: genikē meletē tōn “Meth’ Homēron” kai tou poiētē tous* (Athens 1962) 8–10.

³⁹ See discussion further below.

⁴⁰ Cf. the twelfth-century poet and grammarian Johannes Tzetzes on Lycoph., *Alex.* 999, who goes further in saying that Diomedes avenged the death of his cousin by throwing the dead body of Penthesileia in the river Scamander.

⁴¹ Contrast *Aethiopis* Arg. §4 West = lines 23–24 Bernabé (= Procl. *Chrest.*), where Proclus summarises the quarrel that specifically arises between Odysseus and Ajax over the armour of Achilles: καὶ περὶ τῶν Ἀχιλλέως ὀπλῶν Ὀδυσσεὶ καὶ Αἴαντι στάσις ἐμπίπτει.

⁴² Cf. Fantuzzi, *loc. cit.* (n. 34) 273.

to the aid of the Trojans.⁴³ It thus becomes glaringly evident that in this specific episode of the *Aethiopis* the status of Achilles as the “best of the Achaeans” suffers a serious blow. Homer makes no reference to the incident. Yet, the puzzling mixture of all the contradictory elements that he so intricately combines in the portrayal of Thersites can arguably be better understood in light of his role in the Penthesileia episode.

If one reads between the lines of *Iliad* 2, then one may begin to see that the story of the fatal conflict between Achilles and Thersites is suggestively present on a sub-textual level. One could argue that, since Thersites casts blame on Agamemnon and sides with Achilles, the enmity with Achilles in *Il.* 2.220–221 is an *ad hoc* invention needed by the narrator to give authority to Thersites’ words as unmotivated by any link to the hero. This is certainly possible. If, however, the episode already existed in mythopoetic traditions known to Homer, which is what our evidence suggests, as we shall see, then we should equally accept the possibility that Homer’s reference to their enmity retrojects the later quarrel and simultaneously, by doing this, sets in motion an advance allusion, anticipating (in terms of epic chronology) the Penthesileia episode, which goes beyond the scope of the *Iliad*’s action.⁴⁴ Moreover, Odysseus’ promise in *Il.* 2.258–264 of further humiliation if Thersites speaks up again would similarly function as a proleptic allusion to the future conflict, and Thersites’ accusations of Agamemnon’s sexual greediness in *Il.* 2.232–233 would arguably evoke his charges against Achilles regarding Penthesileia.⁴⁵

One cannot fail to notice that the Thersites scene in *Iliad* 2 resembles the Penthesileia episode in more ways than one. First, Odysseus chastises Thersites verbally and physically for being abusive of Agamemnon, as in the *Aethiopis* Achilles slays Thersites, after he presumably perceives Thersites’ mockery of his grieving over the death of Penthesileia as a threat to his personal honour. Second, in both episodes the treatment of Thersites has consequences for the unity of the army. In the *Iliad*, his punishment is sanctioned universally. Pleasant laughter, as we have seen, discharges the tensions caused by Agamemnon’s test of his soldiers’ loyalty. In the *Aethiopis*, on the other hand, his death provokes large-scale disorder. Third, Thersites’ speech in both episodes draws upon Achilles’ current situation. In the *Iliad*, the man capitalises on the dishonour done to Achilles to make his case against Agamemnon, implying that the hero was right to withdraw from the battlefield. In the *Aethiopis*, however, Achilles, allowing himself to engage in a rather anti-heroic grief (whether explicitly erotic or not) over the death of a female foe, presumably desists briefly from the effort of fighting while the war is in progress, thereby attract-

43 See *Aethiopis* Arg. §2 West = lines 9–11 Bernabé (= Procl. *Chrest.*).

44 Cf. W. Kullmann, *Die Quellen der Ilias (Troischer Sagenkreis)* (Wiesbaden 1960) 303.

45 Cf. W. Kullmann, “Die Probe des Achaierheeres in der *Ilias*”, *MusHelv* 12 (1955) 272.

ing Thersites' contempt. Finally, Thersites in both episodes receives punishment even though he does have some telling points to make in criticising Agamemnon and Achilles, who, as we have seen, are themselves undoubtedly the first to have disrupted or challenged the heroic code.

So, as should hopefully be clear from the above, there does certainly seem to be some kind of connection between the *Iliad* and the tradition that is reflected in the *Aethiopis*. This, however, raises the question of whether the *Iliad* already knows and evokes intentionally a pre-existing – at least in its broad plot outlines – version of the Penthesileia story. Of course, there is no way of establishing the priority of the Aethiopic tradition on text-internal grounds. A sceptic would argue that all the evidence proves that the Iliadic Thersites is a Homeric invention which post-Homeric poets borrow. For us, therefore, the issue should turn on the question of whether there is reason to suppose that Thersites could be fixed within the genealogy of the heroes, which is where our evidence for the Aetolian connection of Thersites comes in.

The Iliadic Thersites, depicted as a conspicuously repulsive figure and remarkably deprived by the poet of homeland and patronymic, which are as a rule provided for all other speaking characters in Homer,⁴⁶ came to be commonly regarded as a commoner fighting for the ordinary people. Outside Homer, however, significant information from scattered references and pictorial representations do credit him with a higher status. As early as the fifth-century BC, the logographer Pherecydes presents Thersites as a member of the house of Aetolia and participant in the Calydonian boar hunt,⁴⁷ but the fullest source for a genealogical stemma is provided by the *Bibliotheca* of Ps.-Apollodorus, where Thersites has a place within the lineage of the Aetolian kings and is, by implication, presented as the cousin of the famous Meleager and Tydeus (their father, Oineus, is the brother of Thersites' father, Agrios) and the uncle of the mighty Diomedes (the son of Tydeus).⁴⁸ The Aetolian pedigree of Thersites would certainly cohere well with the tradition of the *Aethiopis*, where, as we have seen, his murder is followed by a large-scale dispute, in which perhaps, as our evidence from Quintus suggests, Diomedes played a significant role as his closest kinsman. Quintus' version is presupposed, too, in

⁴⁶ Two further exceptions are Iros, who is clearly identified as a public beggar in the city of Ithaca (*Od.* 18.1–2), though his mother is mentioned but not named (see *Od.* 18.5); and Adrestos, a Trojan warrior killed by Agamemnon in *Il.* 6.37–65, who is not identified by place of origin or patronymic, but his noble identity can be deduced from the context, as he promises Menelaus treasure from his wealthy father (*Il.* 6.46–50).

⁴⁷ See Pherecydes *FGrHist* 3 F 123 (= Σ (bT) *Il.* 2.212). On this fragment, see R. Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, vol. 2 (Oxford 2013) 139–140.

⁴⁸ See [Apollod.], *Bibl.* 1.7.7–1.8.6; cf. Lycoph., *Alex.* 1000 (together with Tzetzes on Lycoph., *Alex.* 999); Quint. Smyrn. 1.770–773; Σ (bT) *Il.* 2.212; Σ (D) *Il.* 2.212; Eust. on *Il.* 2.212; Tzet., *Chil.* 7.151.879–882 and 7.153.919–920.

the pictorial representation on a fourth-century BC Apulian krater,⁴⁹ where, as has been argued, “[Achilles] has slain Thersites, and Diomedes is hastening to avenge his death, but he is restrained by the Atridae.”⁵⁰ This representation has been assumed to reflect Chaeremon’s fourth-century BC play Ἀχιλλεύς Θερσιτοκτόνος ἢ Θερσίτης, which survives only in fragments.⁵¹ Also, in accordance with sources that point to Thersites’ Aetolian origins, there is some evidence that makes him a suitor of Helen. On another fourth-century BC krater from Apulia,⁵² Thersites is portrayed as a young man along with Menelaus, Odysseus, Helen, and Leda. The presence of Aphrodite and Eros, as well as the conspicuous absence of all the unflattering attributes that the *Iliad* heaps upon him, allows us to correlate the scene with the wooing of Helen.⁵³ It thus becomes evident that outside of the *Iliad* Thersites features as a much more esteemed high-status Aetolian than the misshapen and incorrigible buffoon that we meet in Homer.

The “Aetolian Thersites” has often been assumed to be an elaboration of his unfavourable portrayal in the *Iliad*.⁵⁴ Yet, such an assumption is in reality no more demonstrable than the view which sees the “Aetolian Thersites” as belonging to the mythopoetic traditions that predate the *Iliad*. Either hypothesis is equally plausible, of course, but there is still good reason to favour the latter. Although there is no way of proving that Thersites was not a new arrival in Homer, the pedigree he is given outside the *Iliad* offers good ground to believe that he was already an established figure within the intricate tradition from which the poet derived *his* Thersites.⁵⁵ This, in turn, reinforces the assumption that Homer was, in fact, already familiar with some version of the Penthesileia story and alluded specifically to it.⁵⁶

49 LIMC, “Thersites”, n. 829.

50 J. M. Paton, “The Death of Thersites on an Apulian Amphora in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts”, *AJA* 12.4 (1908) 412.

51 For further bibliography on Chaeremon’s play and its relation to the Apulian krater, see Fantuzzi, *loc. cit.* (n. 34) 273 n. 20.

52 LIMC, “Hélène”, n. 301.

53 See Kullmann, *loc. cit.* (n. 44) 146–148, esp. 147 n. 2.

54 See, e.g., M. M. Willcock (ed.), *The Iliad of Homer. Books I–XII* (London 1978) 200 on *Il.* 2.220; T. B. L. Webster, *From Mycenae to Homer* (London 1958) 251.

55 Cf. Rankin, *loc. cit.* (n. 9) 48–49.

56 Cf. Kullmann, *loc. cit.* (n. 45) 270–272, who, as we shall see below, derives the Iliadic Thersites scene from the initial part of the *Aethiopis*, whose priority over the *Iliad* is categorically endorsed in Kullmann, *loc. cit.* (n. 44) *passim* (for the latter, contrast D. L. Page, “The Sources of the *Iliad*”, *ClRev* 11.3, 1961, 205–209; G. L. Huxley, *Greek Epic Poetry from Eumelos to Panyassis*, London 1969, 124). West, *loc. cit.* (n. 25) 141 recently argued that “the *Iliad* poet probably had no knowledge of the Penthesileia story (...); he will be alluding to some other occasion(s) on which Thersites had bar-racked Achilles. A plausible occasion (if the episode already existed in poetry known to the *Iliad* poet) would be the assembly at which Achilles, after having seen Helen, persuaded the despondent Achaeans to continue the war [*Cypria* Arg. §11 West = lines 59–61 Bernabé (= Procl. *Chrest.*)].” Even though not explicitly stated, West’s assumption is presumably based on the fact that in the *Iliad*

If indeed Homer knows the Penthesileia story, as there are reasonable grounds to believe, but deliberately avoids direct reference to it, then there must be an explanation for this.⁵⁷ The erotically suggestive grief of Achilles over the death of Penthesileia arguably sits uncomfortably alongside the heroic ideal in Homer, which, as mentioned before, rigorously avoids grief over a dead foe, let alone *erotic* grief: *eros*, far too close as it is to human experience and largely irrelevant to the core values of war, is an aspect that is, for the most part, elided from the Iliadic poetics.⁵⁸ More to the point, however, the Penthesileia story differs significantly from the *Iliad* regarding their respective portrayals of Achilles. Achilles in the *Aethiopis*, allowing himself to grieve over the death of Penthesileia, probably pauses temporarily in the fighting and in the process alienates himself from the Greeks in a manner that not only exposes his comrades to danger but also affords him no τιμή. In the *Iliad*, by contrast, Achilles is so stridently worried about his τιμή that his withdrawal is necessitated by a compelling need to defend and secure it. From this point of view, the *Iliad* does have good reason to brush aside the Aethiopic Achilles. By refusing direct reference to the story, Homer essentially purges *his* Achilles, the “best of the Achaeans”, of the un-heroic sorrow that the Aethiopic Achilles feels over a dead female foe, namely, from an incident which is in many ways alien to, and incongruous with, the Iliadic conceptualisation of the hero. However, not only does he refine away the Penthesileia story, but he also implicitly undermines, as we shall see, the unfavourable characterisation of Achilles embedded in it.

Thersites’ unfavourable introductory portrait (including the reference to his enmity with both Achilles and Odysseus) is certainly used by the poet as an instrument of *Rezeptionssteuerung* (focalisation of attention) to predispose the audience negatively towards him.⁵⁹ Yet, the content of his speech receives neither criticism of substance nor refutation.⁶⁰ As we have seen, moreover, in criticising Agamemnon of greed, Thersites brings the injustice inflicted against

there is an “absence of any allusion to an encounter of Achilles with an Amazon” (p. 136). As he recognises, however, “there is no definite argument” that the *Amazonis* (the piece of composition that was prefixed to the *Memnonis* to form the *Aethiopis*) is later than the *Iliad* (pp. 133–134). What is more, it is highly improbable that the meeting between Achilles and Helen predates the *Iliad*: for a detailed discussion, see Lambrou, *loc. cit.* (n. 6) 68–80.

⁵⁷ Reference to the incident might be difficult chronologically but not impossible. As it has long been observed, the *Iliad*’s focus on the wrath of Achilles does not preclude the poet from skillfully incorporating events that lie outside the poem’s chronological boundaries: see, e.g., J. Latacz, *Homer, his Art and his World* (trans. by J. P. Holoka, Ann Arbor, MI 1996) 89, 132; M. S. Silk, *Homer. The Iliad* (Cambridge 1987) 41–43.

⁵⁸ Cf. Fantuzzi, *loc. cit.* (n. 34) 3, 193, 267; Silk, *loc. cit.* (n. 57) 84, 104.

⁵⁹ Cf. Latacz *et al.*, *loc. cit.* (n. 7) 70 on *Il.* 2.211–224.

⁶⁰ Cf. J. Marr, “Class Prejudice in the Ancient Greek World: Thersites, Cleon, and Other Upstarts”, *Pegasus* 48 (2005) 4; Rankin, *loc. cit.* (n. 9) 44.

Achilles to the fore once more and sympathises remarkably with him.⁶¹ We can perhaps associate this with the fact that his status remains ambiguous throughout: Thersites is portrayed in a way which suggests that he is a commoner, but he speaks as a man of consequence so that, as has been rightly argued, he “bears enough similarities to both leaders and soldiers for him to serve as the double of all the rest.”⁶² In this light, though he is the first and essentially the only Greek who backs Achilles, Thersites may be seen as the embodiment of general support.⁶³ This must be a key function of Thersites’ speech. The audience needs to be aware of the impact that Achilles’ withdrawal has among the Achaeans. There must still be, however, some deeper significance in the fact that it is specifically in the person of Thersites that Achilles finds full support.

No doubt, Thersites’ praise for Achilles is based on and motivated by his self-serving objective to make his case against the leadership of Agamemnon, rhetorically embracing the logic that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”.⁶⁴ From a poetological perspective, however, the scene requires particular attention. If the assumption we made earlier is correct, that the Penthesileia story predates the *Iliad*, then “Thersites” takes on a sub-textual dimension as an inter-poetic tool, and his entirely unanticipated support for Achilles, his soon-to-be murderer (!), would strongly draw the audience’s attention to this function: Thersites would appear to strikingly retract all the accusations that he makes against Achilles in the *Aethiopis*. The fact, moreover, that he is also emphatically depicted as an extremely unpopular and obnoxiously ugly figure, so pitilessly chastised both verbally and physically, can arguably be understood as part of the process of attenuating or even obliterating the (in Iliadic terms) negative connotations embedded in the characterisation of a romantic Achilles, susceptible to erotic emotion and female beauty, in the Penthesileia story. Since there are, as we have seen, sources outside the *Iliad* which do *not* delineate Thersites as such, it is entirely possible that Homer unfavourably adjusted his traditional portrait to set the audience *both* against Thersites as a “blame persona”, as often assumed,⁶⁵ and against a poetic tradition, which – re-

61 The wrath of Achilles is referred to five more times between Books 1 and 9. According to Latacz, *loc. cit.* (n. 57) 124–125, this is how the *Iliad* poet maintains “a unified action” and also emphasises that “Achilles is present even in his absence”, thereby raising awareness of “the temporary nature of the present situation”.

62 Thalmann, *loc. cit.* (n. 20), 24.

63 Cf. Postlethwaite, *loc. cit.* (n. 4) 128; Rankin, *loc. cit.* (n. 9) 53.

64 Cf. Rankin, *loc. cit.* (n. 9) 51.

65 See Marks, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 8 (following G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, 2nd ed., rev. with new intro., Baltimore 1999, 262) and K. Zieliński, “Removing the Hunch or Thersites Re-appreciated”, *Eos* 91.2 (2004) 215, who interpret the repulsive figure of a scurrilous Thersites as the *Iliad*’s means of vociferating against blame poetry. Others see Thersites as Achilles’ comic double: see, e.g., M. M. Willcock, *A Companion to the Iliad: Based on the*

called through the agency of Thersites – so clearly conflicts with the Iliadic heroic ideal. Therefore, the idiosyncratic portrayal of Thersites may well be seen as a tool in the poetic refinement of a purely honour-oriented Achilles.

This present study is not the first to suggest that Homer appropriated a pre-Iliadic Thersites tradition. Applying a Neoanalytic source-and-recipient model, W. Kullmann argued that the *Iliad* poet recontextualised the Aethiopic Thersites scene in the framework of Book 2: with Achilles being absent from the scene, Thersites upbraids Agamemnon and repeats what Achilles said earlier in *Iliad* 1, using some of the words that he originally uttered against the hero in the *Aethiopis* itself or its source.⁶⁶ This theory implies that “Thersites” was almost “transplanted” from the *Aethiopis* to the *Iliad*, yet there are limits to how far the idea of a linear-genetic composition can be taken, for usually choices of plot and character by Homer reflect strategic considerations rather than simple capitulation to the tradition.⁶⁷

Unlike Kullmann, J. Marks saw the two scenes as an interacting pair and argued that the *Iliad*, inviting comparison between its own representation of Thersites and the representation of Thersites in the Aethiopic tradition, foregrounds the opposition between the heroics of Odysseus, “the hero of persuasion and stratagem”, and the heroics of Achilles, “the hero of force”.⁶⁸ Marks’ approach, employing an intertextual hermeneutic which does allow for a dialogical interaction between the *Iliad* and the Aethiopic tradition, certainly achieved a major step forward in understanding the dramatic effect that Homer aims for in this scene.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, it still fails to offer a complete explanation for a number of pronounced complexities: the unusual emphasis that the *Iliad* places on Thersites’ obnoxiousness; his conspicuously ambiguous status; his unanticipated sympathy towards Achilles; the blatant contradiction between this expressed sympathy and the narrator’s brief yet obtrusive reference to ongoing enmity between Achilles and Thersites.

Though for the content of the *Aethiopis* we are entirely dependent on the prose summary of Proclus, and given the subsequent difficulty of obtaining

Translation by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago 1976) 20 on *Il.* 2.225–242; Fantuzzi, *loc. cit.* (n. 34) 272–273. If that were the case, however, then the resulting “parody” of Achilles’ earlier reproaches of Agamemnon would arguably undermine the strategic emphasis that the *Iliad* places on the repeated foregrounding of the underlying theme of the action, the wrath of Achilles: see above, n. 61.

⁶⁶ See Kullmann, *loc. cit.* (n. 45) 270–272.

⁶⁷ A notable case in point is the use of images from the death of Achilles in the *Iliad*’s description of the death of Patroclus: see J. S. Burgess, *The Death and Afterlife of Achilles* (Baltimore 2009) 64; R. Scodel, *Listening to Homer: Tradition, Narrative, and Audience* (Ann Arbor, MI 2002) 4–5. For a detailed discussion of the Neoanalytic approach to the Homeric Question, see Lambrou, *loc. cit.* (n. 6) 15–17.

⁶⁸ Marks, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 22–23.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of Homeric intertextuality and further bibliography, see Lambrou, *loc. cit.* (n. 6) 17–19.

absolute certainty, a compelling case can still be made for the possibility that the *Iliad*, gesturing creatively towards the Penthesileia story, implicitly evokes and simultaneously downplays the un-Homeric erotic grief of Achilles for the dead Amazon in order to meet its own dramatic purposes. The Iliadic Achilles, “the best of the Achaeans”, obsessed with his individual honour, falls victim to political frictions and is – through the person of Thersites, as we have seen – universally acknowledged to be correct to withdraw from the battle. In the Penthesileia story, by contrast, Achilles, being attracted to the dead queen, ceases fighting, thereby failing to protect his individual honour because of his own weakness. The role of Thersites in the Penthesileia story opens the *Iliad*’s overwhelming emphasis on his unfavourable portrait to a more nuanced interpretation: the Iliadic Thersites attracts blame precisely because outside the *Iliad* he inflicts serious damage on the personal integrity of Achilles, the *Iliad*’s paradigmatic hero, by putting a spotlight on his erotic weakness. On this reading, Thersites functions as a meta-poetic device. Homer’s unsympathetic representation of Thersites as a *persona non grata*, the worst of the Achaeans and the most hateful to Achilles, as well as Thersites’ overt sympathy for Achilles, may well be seen as an intertextual apology and ultimately as part of a self-reflexive poetic strategy. Homer, while sub-textually acknowledging the existence of the Penthesileia story, emphatically underscores – through the idiosyncratic construction of the Iliadic Thersites episode – the uniqueness of his own Achilles in his single-minded pursuit of honour and glory in battle and pointedly manifests the sharp distinctness of the Homeric Achilles from the much less distinctive Achilles that the Penthesileia story presents.

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