

## The Wisdom of Thersites

The title is meant in earnest. Thersites sacrifices himself for the war-effort, resolving the crisis of Agamemnon's ill-considered plan to "test" the men in *Iliad* 2. He undercuts Achilles' speech by travestyng it, and so draws Odysseus to beat him so that the men will laugh, praise Odysseus, and support Agamemnon again. The whole sequence is overdetermined. Hera tells Athena who tells Odysseus to restrain the troops, a task Thersites ultimately completes: Odysseus has cowed them with violence and political lectures, but Thersites dissolves the tension between kings and soldiers by offering himself as common laughingstock. In this way he does the work of Hera at several removes, filling out the parallel Thersites:Hephaestus. By book's end, the men have gone aboard only symbolically, in Homer's Catalogue of Ships, which represents not the attempted return home but a re-commitment to their arrival in Troy and the war they have been waging.

One explanation of how Thersites restores order comes from an unexpected source. The social scientist Jeffrey C. Johnson and co-authors study the group dynamics of men on stressful missions far from home, such as fishermen at an Alaskan outpost (1983) and scientists at the South Pole (2003). Johnson has found that the presence of a "deviant, low-status individual," a clown who is the frequent object of others' pranks, prevents the group from dissolving when leadership is questioned. This person does not fit well with any clique and is therefore able to mediate among leaders, their subordinates, and warring factions, even as he is mocked by all.

The essential ambiguity of Johnson's "deviant, low-status individual" is mirrored in the ambiguous status of Thersites. Some readers are confident that he is one of the common soldiers (e.g., Rose 1988). Others are just as confident that he is one of the kings (e.g., Kirk 1985). But he

would be an extraordinary member of either group. If a common soldier, then he is the only one who speaks individually and under his own name, the others being relegated to “*tis* speeches” reflecting group opinion (Beck 2012). If he is a king, then he is unique in being extremely ugly, deformed, and anti-heroic.

Given Thersites’ obvious intelligence and the oratorical skill for which even Odysseus praises him (2.246), it is possible that Thersites is aware of the role of clown and how to wield it. If he is a “scapegoat” (Thalman 1988), then he seems to have taken on his burdens willingly. Through the brilliant misdirection of his speech and beating, he contributes to the war in the best way his broken body allows. He restores the status and corrects the mistakes of Agamemnon, the master he truly serves, and he prevents the epic from slipping off into a story beyond what has been allotted by Fate (2.155), which is to say, he sacrifices himself also to save the *Iliad*. Borges 1964 discusses a similar act of self-sacrifice in Koine Greek literature.

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