

“Let it go.”: Archil. Fr. 5 West and Homeric Interpretation

This paper focuses on the final two lines of the four line Shield Poem (Fr. 5 W) by Archilochus, and argues that intertextual analysis with the Homeric epics throws light on several interpretative and textual ambiguities. Traditionally, the first two lines of this poem have attracted the majority of attention due to their focus on Archilochus as a supposed *ripsaspis*, or “shield-abandoner” (Seidensticker 1978).

Although several Homeric intertexts have been identified and discussed in this poem (Di Benedetto 1991), this analysis will begin with a detailed discussion of the third person singular active imperative ἐρρέτω “Let (it) go,” which appears in line-initial position in the final line of Archilochus’ poem. Here it expresses the author’s reaction to leaving behind his shield. This word appears only three times in Homeric poetry, all in line-initial position, and in no other authors that are contemporary to or precede Archilochus. When it does appear in tragedy, it involves characters involved in the Trojan saga (Soph. *Phil.* 1200, Eur. *Phoen.* 624, Eur. *Andr.* 1223).

In *Iliad* 9.377, Achilles uses this verb to express his rejection of Agamemnon’s ransom, saying that he has plenty of material wealth already: “Let him go (to hell),” he says of Agamemnon. The context of injured pride, anger at stolen commodities, and a rejection of goods provides several points of commonality and contrast with Archilochus’ poem. Archilochus claims he can replace the shield easily, but Achilles claims that material recompense cannot resolve the conflict. In *Iliad* 20.349, Achilles describes with great confidence Aeneas’ earlier escape from a duel, “Let him go.” Achilles interprets Aeneas’ departure as cowardly flight, despite the audience’s knowledge that Aeneas was unwillingly rescued by Poseidon (20.318-27). Ultimately, Achilles negatively judges Aeneas’ valor, despite the divine contingencies of which

he cannot know. The audience, however, may judge differently. Archilochus presents a similarly ambiguous situation in his Shield Poem, one that has exercised the interpretive faculties of many scholars: has the speaker fled battle or not? I argue that Archilochus is fully aware that in the case of his Shield Poem, as in *Iliad* 20, the perception and characterization of the soldier's departure from battle, and its ethical ramifications, are matters of interpretation. Therefore the contextual vagueness of the Shield Poem may be an aesthetic choice rather than a deficiency. This reading is consistent with recent attempts to further nuance Archilochus' relationship with Homeric epic, rather than taking a purely positive or subversive analytical perspective (Anderson 2008).

Furthermore, an unrecognized intertext exists between the line immediately following ἐπρέτω in *Iliad* 20 (...ὄς καὶ νῦν φύγεν ἄσμενος ἐκ θανάτοιο.), and the alternative third line of the Shield Poem (αὐτὸς δ' ἐξέφυγον θανάτου τέλος.) as recorded in Aristoph. *Pax* 1301, Elias, Sextus Empiricus and Proclus. Yet this intertext is complicated by the sole appearance of ἐπρέτω in the *Odyssey* (5.139), again in line-initial position. Here Calypso refers to Odysseus. At first glance, this lacks overtly significant contextual commonalities with Archilochus' poem. However, if one considers the earlier portion of Calypso's speech (5.130), τὸν μὲν ἐγὼν ἐσάωσα ("and I myself saved him") one finds another potential intertext to West's reading of the third line of Archilochus' Shield Poem (αὐτὸν δ' ἐξεσάωσα...). Instead of being reliant on divine salvation, the Archilochean narrator takes matters into his own hands and saves himself. One might also consider that the subject of ἐπρέτω in the *Odyssey*, namely Odysseus, is the volitional actor in his departure. Calypso is resignedly obeying divine commands; Achilles is defiant in the face of external pressures or rivals. Which is ultimately appropriate for Archilochus? How one

views the tone of Archilochus' ἐπρέτω depends on the interpretation of the narrator's actions. Finally, how do we choose our third line if both variants have good intertextual support?

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