

Losing Battles, Winning Glory: Casualty Data and the Tides of War in the *Iliad*

Many scholars have noted a discrepancy in the *Iliad*: on the macroscopic level, the plot requires that the Trojans prevail in battle during Achilles' absence, and indeed the Trojans meet with increasing success as they gradually encroach upon the Achaean ships (Books 8, 11-12, 15-16). Yet simultaneously, on the microscopic level of the narrated episodes that comprise these battles, the Achaeans excel by wide margins – for example, the Achaeans slay over 269 Trojans but lose only 54 of their own men in the course of the poem. A few explanations have been ventured to account for this incongruity, the most common positing that the poem is animated by pro-Hellenic bias and therefore awards the Achaeans victories in spite of the strictures of the plot (van der Valk 1953, Armstrong 1969, etc.). Kakridis 1971 vigorously opposes this notion, arguing instead that the poet could not represent the Achaeans suffering a decisive defeat in the same year that the tradition dictates that Troy must fall. But that is precisely the problem: the poet *does* represent a decisive defeat for the Achaeans – on the macro-level alone. Lang 1995 employs a neo-analytical argument to account for the tension: the poet wanted to compose the “wrath story” of Achilles, which called for Achaean defeat, but nevertheless incorporated traditional material from an earlier Trojan “war story,” in which the Achaeans prevail, resulting in the contradiction presently at issue. *A priori*, Lang's hypothesis could be correct, but it rests on speculation. Rather, I will argue that this discrepancy reflects the poet's consistent conception of the relative might of the Achaeans, the Trojans, Achilles, and Zeus.

The first part of my paper sketches the scope of the inconsistency, which is far wider than scholars have credited up to now. My analysis draws on a great deal of objective evidence gathered from a dataset I have composed logging the details of every martial episode in the epic. These data reveal that not only do the Achaeans dominate in inflicting fatalities; they excel in a

host of secondary metrics in virtually every book of the epic, such as taking spoils, slaying enemy leaders, and dealing grislier wounds. Once the magnitude of the Achaeans' mass of micro-victories is established, the second part of my paper seeks an explanation for the discrepancy under consideration. I do partially agree with van der Valk et al.: many of the Achaeans' micro-victories are of no ultimate consequence and thus cannot be explained by the exigencies of the plot. Instead, these episodes appear to be motivated by a compensatory impulse to offer the Achaeans some glory even amidst defeat (cf. Books 10, 13, and 14) – and the Trojans receive no such compensation in Books 16 or 20-22. More importantly, I contend that this discrepancy reflects the poet's conception of the relative might of each army and the relative value of Achilles as an individual warrior. Achilles is unquestionably the best of the Achaeans, but the Achaean victory in Books 3-7, on both the macro- and micro-scale, demonstrates that he is not irreplaceable – and given what the poet tells us about the size and strength of each army, this makes good sense. The Achaeans vastly outnumber the Trojans (cf. 2.120-133), and individual Achaean champions are much more effective than their Trojan counterparts. It is only when Zeus begins to favor the Trojans in Book 8 that the Achaeans begin to suffer macroscopic setbacks, and even then, the Achaeans' "natural" superiority is such that they continue to excel individually even if the army is unsuccessful. The discrepancy at issue achieves three effects as a result. First, it emerges *why* Achilles must have Zeus intercede to imperil the Achaeans: *ceteris paribus*, the withdrawal of the Myrmidons is not enough to endanger the entire army. Second, the poet highlights the Achaeans' superiority, which takes the king of the gods himself to curb. Third, and in counterpoint to the second effect, the poet emphasizes the inevitability of Zeus' will, which can even exalt the weaker over the stronger (cf. 8.143-144, 16.688-690, 17.175-178, 20.242-243, 434-437). Analysis of this supposed

contradiction based upon a thorough reconsideration of every engagement reveals the remarkable unity of purpose and theme in the poem's construction.

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