

“Even a woman could carry”: *Knights* 1056 and *Little Iliad* F2

In their contest for the love of Demos, Paphlagon boasts of capturing hundreds of Spartan “ravenfish” (at Pylos) and the Sausage Seller replies, *καί κε γυνή φέροι*. That cryptic line goes unanswered and we would not guess its significance were it not for the scholia: it comes from the “Judgment of Arms” in the *Little Iliad*. On the advice of Nestor, the Achaeans sent out scouts to listen in on the Trojans, thus to discover which of the two contenders for Achilles’ legacy was the more deserving. They overheard two girls arguing over that very issue: one praised Ajax for rescuing the body of Achilles and (at Athena’s prompting) the other responded with the insult: Odysseus fought off the Trojans as Ajax made off with the body, and even a woman could carry a burden if she doesn’t have to fight for it. This version of the Judgment seems, as Martin West described it, “the silliest and most far-fetched,” assuming “[t]he second girl’s aphorism ... is decisive for the award of the arms to Odysseus” (2013: 176). But that way of deciding the issue would also be absurd to the ancient audience.

This paper offers a new reconstruction of the episode in line with the workings of archaic justice. In *Odyssey* 11.547, Odysseus recalls that *παῖδες Τρώων* “gave judgment” in his favor; the scholiast on that line says it was athetized by Aristarchos as an interpolation from the epic cycle, and scholars have often supposed that it is essentially the same tale that figures in *Little Iliad*. But the scholia on *Od.* 11.547 tell us explicitly that Trojan captives gave judgment decisively, and that should mean that *they* were in agreement. Conversely, the girls’ opinions in *Little Iliad* amounted to a split decision which would require some further resolution.

Resorting to outsiders suggests in itself that the two sides were fiercely divided and, in that situation, the girl’s insult could only deepen the division. The new complication should lead

to a novel solution, and the nature of it can be construed from later adaptations: the split decision was resolved by debate and a vote of some sort. A particular version of that scenario captured the Athenian imagination in the early fifth century: cup paintings by Douris, Makron, and the Brygan group all show an open vote and a very narrow margin, often with ballots stacked neatly on either side. These voters may be described as Homeric heroes asserting democratic dignity (Spivey 1994), as the paintings show a process where every ballot may prove decisive. On one Brygan cup, Ajax loses by only one vote as he looks on to witness each man making his choice. That focus on democracy's moral burden probably added to the pathos of Aeschylus' trilogy, where the hero's madness was revealed in his suicidal struggle with a cloak of invulnerability.

Sophocles seems to have followed the plot of *Little Iliad* more closely, as the berserk madness is revealed in the slaughter of livestock (without the heraclean cloak). In the backstory, evidently, the margin of victory was overwhelming, so as to provoke a "plot against the whole army" (*Ajax* 1055); the Trojan girls' split decision led to a debate where Odysseus, by his artfulness, won the hearts of a strong majority. Ajax witnessed one comrade after another casting his own vote, and that made the betrayal personal.

Earlier epic probably made the decision by consensus: each man raised his arm or his voice in solidarity; such may have been the scene in *Aithiopsis* that Pindar drew upon in *Isthmian* 4 (Spelman 2018). But the political landscape was shifting and Pindar seems to seize on a rival scenario in *Nemeans* 7 and 8, where he condemns the *plēthos*, "blind at heart," for their decision by "secret(ive) ballots." Those κρύφια ψᾶφοι may be Pindar's own adaptation (as Rutherford 2015 suggests), but they are probably represented on an amphora in Kansas City by the Syleus painter (Pinney and Hamilton 1982).

Whatever we make of the fifth-century variations, both open voting and secret ballot lead back to the same finding: the Trojan girl's saying was not decisive, any more than the Sausage Seller won by that one retort.

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