

Achilles Revolutionary? *Iliad* 1.191

As the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon in the first book of the *Iliad* reaches its climax, Achilles ponders whether to kill Agamemnon on the spot (1.188–92):

ἐν δέ οἱ ἦτορ στήθεσσιν λασίοισι διάνδιχα μερμήριζεν,
ἦ ὅ γε φάσγανον ὄξυ ἐρυσσάμενος παρὰ μηροῦ
τούς μὲν ἀναστήσειεν, ὃ δ' Ἀτρεΐδην ἐναρίζοι,
ἦε χόλον πάσειεν ἐρητύσειέ τε θυμόν.

It is the first part of line 191 that has caused some discomfort and even perplexity. *Lfgre* s.v. ἀνίστημι 1a reports: “exact nuance unclear, depending on referent of τούς.” In commentaries (Ameis–Hentze–Cauer [1892], Kirk [1985] Latacz et al [2003], cf. Frankel [1968]), and translations (Lattimore [1951], Murray [1999²], Alexander [2015]), the proposed solutions interpret ἀναστήσειεν as “to drive away,” “to scatter.” They differ, however, in their interpretation of τούς, with some suggesting that it refers to the men around Agamemnon, or the men around Achilles. LSJ, on the other hand, gloss ἀνίστημι “to *make* people *rise*, *break up* an assembly *by force*.” These suggestions – viz. that, in parallel to his slaying of Agamemnon, Achilles pondered whether to drive away either Agamemnon’s (supposed) bodyguard, or his own (supposed) followers – are unconvincing, nor would adjourning the assembly have much bearing on the assassination of Agamemnon. Although limiting τούς to the Greek chieftains, Schesmer (1927) was on the right track when he recognized that the basic meaning of ἀνίστημι is neither to adjourn a meeting, nor to scatter some or all of the assembled Greeks, nor to

drive someone out of the way, but rather “to raise up,” “rouse up,” or “arouse into action”: cf. *Il.* 7.116, 10.176, 15.64, 18.358.

Achilles intends, then, to rouse up the army, to rouse them to action. Indeed, the meaning seems obvious, but commentators have perhaps shied away from it because it opens an unexpected and somewhat disconcerting feature of Achilles’ character. What Achilles appears to contemplate is not only regicide, but to foment open rebellion on the part of the army, an action that would have the gravest political consequences for the whole expedition, either aborting the whole undertaking or choosing a new leader.

Shocking as it may seem, Achilles’ impulse has not been unmotivated if one understands his confrontation with Agamemnon not only as a personal, but as a public one, fraught with political implications and played out before the assembled λαός. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of the *laos* and its consent as well as the obligation of the leader to look after their well-being and to heed public opinion (Elmer [2013], Hammer [2002], Haubald [2000], Raaflaub [1997], Andreev [1979]; cf. Fraenkel [1968]). In rejecting Chryses’ request, Agamemnon not only ignored public opinion in the first assembly but precipitated the plague. The king’s subsequent grudging return of Chryseis leads to another violation of the army’s prerogatives; the awarding of γέρα. If the ‘shepherd of the people’ must look after his flock, ideally, *hoi polloi*, in turn, have the power to reward good leadership through the distribution of *gera*.

At this point, the social compact that acknowledges Agamemnon’s leadership and underpins the whole expedition has been broken. At least momentarily, Achilles contemplates nothing short of a *coup d’état*. To be sure, both murder and mayhem are prevented by Athena’s intervention. But while the goddess restrains his homicidal rage,

Achilles proceeds to indict the whole Greek army for its passivity in the face of the king's outrages. The initial words of line 191 have, I submit, been overlooked or misinterpreted, because their obvious meaning and correct understanding open a new and unsettling political dimension to the epic and its hero. This paper will explore its consequences.

Bibliography

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