

I: HOMER AND POLITICAL THOUGHT¹

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Plato did Homer no favors. When Plato banished Homer from his republic, he posited a split between epic and philosophic knowledge that would remain a part of a Western philosophical tradition. For Plato, the problem with the Homeric epics was that they were imitations of phenomenal appearance because they depicted the shadowy world of human action and emotion. Though tempered in recent years by examinations of both the philosophic contributions of literature and the literary basis of philosophy, what has often emerged is a distinction, made both implicitly and explicitly, between political thought – which is depicted as a systematic, reasoned, reflective, and critical account of the political world – and the epics – which are often characterized as uncritical appropriations of myths, legends, stories, and superstitions. As evidence, commentators point to a seemingly irrational cosmology alive with divine forces, inconsistencies in the stories that comprise the epic, and the oral nature of epic verse in which the aim was to tell a particular story and not to analyze the foundations of thought.

In this chapter, I approach Homer as a political thinker. By this I mean both that the epics are engaged in critical reflection and that this reflection is political in nature.² The chapter will proceed in several

¹ This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Walter Donlan. I thank Vincent Farenga for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter and Craig Harris for his research assistance. I follow Lattimore's translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* unless otherwise noted.

² I use Homer as shorthand for the poet or poets who composed the epics. My belief is that the epics assumed their current form in the second half of the eighth century (perhaps as late as the first half of the seventh century). For an overview of what is known as the "Homeric question," which now appears as questions about both the authorship and dating of the epic, see Schein 1984: 1–44; Powell 2004; and

parts. First, I will examine two major obstacles to approaching the epics as works of political thought: the ideas that oral poetry lacks a critical dimension and that Homeric society is pre-political. I end these sections by making an argument about what is critical and what is political in the epics. In the subsequent sections, I engage in a series of forays into Homeric political thought, taking up contending notions of power, rights, the people, gender, and ethics.

ORAL POETRY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

Homeric studies owe a great debt to the pioneering work of Milman Parry, and the continuation of his work by Albert Lord, that explored how the method of “composition *during* oral performance” imposed a structure on Homeric verse.³ Parry provided a way of understanding how a single poet, working within an oral tradition, could compose such a monumental poem. One could imagine a range of analogies – to modern jazz and blues, for example – in which traditional formulas and themes provide the foundation for a composer’s improvisation that, in turn, alters how we hear those formulas. But Parry tended more to emphasize how each formula was fixed in its meaning, how formulaic phrases were chosen because they fit the needs of rhythm and meter, and how, when added together, the meanings of each discrete formula defined the totality of the poem’s meaning.⁴ Others, taking Parry still further, have examined the conceptual limits placed on the Homeric epics by an oral consciousness. Havelock, for example, characterized the Homeric epics as a “compilation of inherited lore,” a “tribal encyclopedia” of conventions, practices, and procedures that cannot conceive of or reflect on the world around it.⁵ We should not be surprised, then, when political relationships in the epic, including debate and council, are seen as “composed summarily and formulaically” and offered “only as the story prompts their intrusion.”⁶

Graziosi and Haubold 2005: 15–34. Though Homer draws extensively from an oral poetic tradition, the unity of its structure and images, as well as the creative reshaping of this tradition in the development of a unified plot, suggest (though it does not prove) the work of one poet or a poet of the *Odyssey* who learned from and inherited the themes and techniques of the poet of the *Iliad*.

³ Lord 1960: 5.

⁴ Parry 1987: 370. Parry (304) distinguishes between formulaic and ordinary language.

⁵ Havelock 1963: 66.

⁶ Havelock 1963: 69.

An extraordinary amount of scholarship has been devoted to modifying Parry and Lord, whether by rescuing Homer through recourse to aesthetics, by suggesting that the epics actually evince traces of literacy, or by viewing orality and literacy as forms of textualization. More promising has been growing interest in viewing orality as a form of communication and interaction between poet and audience. Bakker, for example, in seeking both to remind us that orality is all around us and to provide a language for analyzing what is distinctive about oral poetry, emphasizes the “crucial importance of the human voice in the production, transmission, and reception of poetry whose essence lies in performance.”⁷ Cognitive psychology has joined with discourse theory to explore how oral communication draws upon mental models of cultural knowledge and experience that are critical for both composition and comprehension. These cognitive models of episodic memory, which are variously called “scripts,” “frames,” “scenarios,” or “schemas,” are comprised of “stereotypical representation[s] of knowledge incorporating a sequence of actions, speech acts and situations.”⁸ The narrative arrangement of these episodes creates a “shared seeing” that expands beyond the immediate words to draw upon a more complex set of cultural images and experiences.⁹ Examples of such episodes include battle and funeral scenes, but can also be extended to scenes of debate, deliberation, and decision. Indeed, Ong’s suggestion that orality embeds knowledge in human struggle serves as a useful way for viewing the epics not only as a means of cultural transmission, as Ong suggests, but also as a way of raising questions about the organization of human experience.¹⁰ The epics, as they were composed in performance, appear as public poetry that was engaged in a reflection on the activity of organizing community life. There are several implications of these performance approaches that help us understand how epic composition introduces a critical dimension to epic poetry.

First, where the epic world is often seen as unconnected to any historical time, the public activity of performance ties the epics back to a broader set of cultural issues contemporaneous with their telling. In the development of plot and characters, as Redfield argues, the poet “employs and persuades us to certain assumptions about the sources and

⁷ Bakker 1997: 32; see also Martin 1989; Foley 1999; Minchin 2001; Scodel 2002; and Farenga 2006.

⁸ Farenga 2006: 8.

⁹ Bakker 1997: 76.

¹⁰ Ong 1982: 44.

conditions of action.”¹¹ Although the poet likely archaized, exaggerated, and made-up components of the heroic past, the composition of the poems, as they convey both coherence and meaning to its audience, rests upon a comprehension of culture – upon the attitudes, assumptions, and material conditions that make the plot believable.¹²

Second, the boundaries, values, beliefs, tensions, and ambiguities of the culture emerge and are given shape dialogically as characters constitute themselves and their world through language. That is, characters, as they enact, extend, and manipulate cultural patterns and codes, are as much performers as the poet. Through what is said and done, as well as what (as narratology has explored) is unspoken, stories “dramatize values.”¹³ Questions of the criteria for the distribution of prizes, the bases of recognition, the responsibilities of leadership, the role of deliberation, and the reasons for fighting, let alone the encounters of the different voices of class and gender, all become subject to examination.

Finally, though the epics may tell us something about social ideals, these idealizations can serve to bring into sharper relief the struggles of community life. The city at peace on Achilles’ shield, for example, stands in dramatic contrast to both the turmoil of the Achaean camp and the imminent destruction of Troy. And the idealized polis of Phaeacia brings into dramatic relief the “anti-Paradise in the heart of the Ithacan polis.”¹⁴ Placed in their social context, the epics present breaches in and inversions of accepted norms, actions, beliefs, and social structures, introducing a “performative reflexivity” in which the artist raises “problems about the ordering principles deemed acceptable in ‘real life.’”¹⁵ Set against the backdrop of war, the *Iliad* exposes divisions within the community that demand resolution at the price of corporate destruction. And the *Odyssey* explores both the disintegration of the social fabric and the encounter with alternate visions of community life.

WHAT IS POLITICAL ABOUT HOMER?

A second obstacle to reading the epics as works of political thought is the view of the epic world as pre-political. Finley, for example, who has

¹¹ Redfield 1994: 58, 23.

¹² See Redfield 1994; Raaflaub 1998: 178–84.

¹³ Redfield 1983: 219.

¹⁴ Cook 1995: 146.

¹⁵ Turner 1988: 27. This is consistent with scholarship that has noted elements of tension, dissonance, and even ideological conflict within the Homeric epics.

argued persuasively for viewing the Homeric world as a functioning social system, concludes, nonetheless, that neither Homeric poem “has any trace of a *polis* in its political sense.” For Finley, “political decisions” must be “binding on the society” and “political units” must have a “governmental apparatus.”¹⁶ Homeric society appears as pre-political because it lacks institutional forms and roles that emerge later: notions of citizenship, a system of governance, and politics, as an autonomous sphere, that defines human life.

These conceptions of the Homeric world are united by a set of assumptions about the nature of politics, assumptions that entered classical scholarship by way of the structural-functional anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown, Fortes, and Evans-Pritchard, and the evolutionary approaches of Service, Sahlins, Fried, and Cohen. Social anthropology provided Homeric scholarship with a powerful tool for viewing the Homeric world as a functioning social system – a fundamental departure from earlier analytic approaches that attempted to identify the inconsistencies, incoherence, and historical layering of the different parts of the poems. The question that emerged from the study of the Homeric epics, as it was guided by this anthropological tradition, was, not surprisingly, largely a taxonomic one: what type of pre-state society is reflected in the epics and does this reflection correspond to an actual historic period (and which one)? Scholars largely (though not completely) have abandoned earlier attempts to locate the epics in a Mycenaean past and more convincingly have identified a historical analogue with the stage of a ranked society out of which more stratified or state societies may develop. The *basileis*, or political leaders, appear as anthropological types of the big man and the chief who possess authority but not much coercive power.¹⁷

But these approaches take us only so far. The absence of formal governmental institutions almost invariably led to a view of the Homeric world as pre-political. Scholars interested in the politics of the epics, then, turned to identifying traces of polis organization, however embryonic, in the epics. In looking for the material conditions that gave rise to the polis, scholars point to the growth in population, density, and social complexity of settlements in the eighth century, which placed greater demands on community organization and coordination and necessitated more refined qualities of leadership and mediation.¹⁸ Important,

¹⁶ Finley 1979: 34; 1983: 9.

¹⁷ Donlan 1979, 1985, 1989, 1997.

¹⁸ For an overview of the archaeological evidence, see Crielaard 1995; Hammer 2002: 29–43; and Farenga 2006: 38–46.

as well, for finding traces of the polis is identifying a shared sense of a past, a common belief system and set of values, jointly enacted rituals, a common sense of a future, and shared responses to new and threatening challenges. Evidence of such communities of territory and identity, as *poleis* are often defined, can be found in references to shrines and altars for public worship that are tied back to civic organization and identity, a town layout with streets, an *agora*, communal washbasins, references to founders, and walls that enclose the entire city and demarcate the “flat land” from “the city” (*Il.* 22.456; also *Od.* 6.3, 177, 191).¹⁹

Viewing the epics against the backdrop of the nascent *polis* has been helpful in providing a context for interpreting the common understanding of both the poet and the audience. But these approaches leave us with a perplexity: institutions are political but the activity of creating those institutions is not. This is a particular problem for Dark and Archaic age politics since, as Raafflaub observed, “Institutions and constitutions and the corresponding terminology had to be newly created, and the political sphere itself had to be discovered and gradually penetrated by thought, understanding, and explanation.”²⁰ To what extent, then, can we talk about the epics as political without defining politics in relationship to particular institutional arrangements?

In developing this language of analysis, we can identify politics not with static structures but with the “flow” of “social processes” – the succession of events, the seeking of goals, the ordering of relations, the emergence of conflict and tensions, the upsetting of norms, the creation of alliances, and attempts at redress and resolution.²¹ Politics, from this perspective, appears as an activity in which questions of community organization are raised, determined, and implemented. There is a corresponding change in the unit of political analysis from a focus

¹⁹ Generally, see Scully 1990 (though rejecting the epics as political); Raafflaub 1991, 1997, 1998; Crielaard 1995; and Hölkeskamp 2002: 324–27. Public worship: *Il.* 1.39, 440 (Achaean camp); 2.303–7, 549–51, 603–4; 6.297–310; 7.83; 8.47–48; 9.404–5; 10.414–16; 11.166–69; 22.169–72; 23.144–48; *Od.* 6.9–10; streets and town planning: *Il.* 2.12; 4.52; 5.642; 6.391; 20.254; agora and public spaces: *Il.* 2.788–89; 7.345; 18.497; *Od.* 1.272; 2.7; 6.266–67; 9.112 (absence); wash-basins/springs: *Il.* 22.153–55; *Od.* 6.291–92; 10.105–8; 17.205–6; foundings: *Il.* 7.452–53; 11.166, 371–72; 20.216–18; 24.349; *Od.* 11.260–65; walls: *Il.* 2.559 (Tiryns), 646 (describing Gortyn, which was not walled until the eighth century), 691; 3.141–55; 6.373; 7.449–53; 12.28–32, 36, 121–23, 258–66, 390, 397–99, 424, 453–62 (gateway); 16.57, 702–3; 18.274–76, 514–15; 21.446–47, 515–17; 22.4, 35–89, 455–65; *Od.* 6.9, 262–67; 7.44–45, 112–13; as a collective entity: *Il.* 21.584–88; *Od.* 2.154.

²⁰ Raafflaub 1989: 5.

²¹ Turner 1974: 37.

on structure and function to a field. The *political field* is constituted by groups who are engaged in issues of identity and organization rather than defined by institutional and territorial boundaries. This adds fluidity to our understanding of politics since the boundaries of the political field can change as activities cut across old boundaries and create new ones.²²

In thinking about what we mean by a political field, it might be helpful to imagine a battlefield. A battlefield is not defined by particular boundaries but is constituted by the activity. The boundaries of the battlefield can expand and contract and the composition of the field can change as new groups enter and exit. That it is the activity that defines the boundaries of a political field, and not the field that defines the activity, is not altogether different from Alcaeus' words in the late seventh and early sixth centuries, "for warlike men are a city's tower," or Nicias' words to his troops, "you yourselves, wherever you settle down, are a city already" (Alc. fr. 112 Campbell; Thuc. 7.77.4).

Through this conception of a field, one might identify a number of activities as political. These would include questions of authority and legitimacy, the exercise of persuasion and force, the emergence of demands or claims on the community, issues of conflict that threaten community organization, and ethical questions of our relationship, obligations, and responsibilities to others. It may well be that in the study of such activities we encounter institutions. But these institutions should be regarded as instances of political processes – particular formalized relationships that emerge from, are constituted by, and continue to be altered through political activity.

VIOLENCE, FORCE, AND POWER

Far from being pre-political, the epics provide an opportunity to explore the operation of politics in its elementally human, rather than its institutional, form. In our political age that is dominated by institutions, there is a tendency to mistake procedural order with political health, imagining politics as regularized processes that exist apart from the power of people to raise questions about the organization and purpose of community life. Power, in fact, appears as the ability of the state to compel obedience. Thus, the exercise of any real political power in the epics is

²² On political fields, see Hammer 2002: 19–48.

seen as compromised by the absence of a governing authority that possesses the “right to exercise force.”²³ To release us from the Weberian association of politics with the exercise of the monopoly of force, I want to suggest that Homer actually invites a reflection on how the intrusion of violence and force, rather than its absence, threatens to sap the political field of its power. In this pre-institutional setting, the “power” of the political field, what keeps this realm of speech and action intact, exists only as people constitute themselves together. “Power is actualized,” writes Arendt, “only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”²⁴ Deception and violence prevent the development of power by denying the condition of power; namely, people acting and speaking together. Fraud and violence, on the contrary, foster the conditions for isolation, rendering in people either weakness and passivity (which is contrary to acting together) or “self-sufficiency and withdrawal from the world.”²⁵

In the opening of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon poses just such a threat to the public realm. His intimidation of Kalchas prevents the seer from speaking truthfully about the cause of the plague. He is both forceful and deceptive toward Achilles, leading the best of the Achaeans to withdraw from the public space. But Achilles’ withdrawal points to more than the discontent of one warrior; it reveals the depletion of power that constitutes this space when the only people who will submit to Agamemnon’s leadership, as Achilles claims, are “nonentities” (*outidanoisin*), those who no longer speak or act (*Il.* 1.231). Agamemnon’s test of his troops gives visual testimony to this depletion of public power and the dissolution of the political field: the troops flee to their ships, possessing neither the will nor the desire to act together in war. In the place of power is force as Odysseus must use the scepter as a weapon to beat back the soldiers. By the ninth book, the implications of the substitution of force for power have become all too clear: the Achaean community faces imminent destruction. Even Agamemnon seems to recognize how inextricably his power is tied to the maintenance of his own people when he laments that he will lose his honor since he “lost many of [his] people” (*Il.* 9.22).²⁶

²³ Finley 1983: 8–9.

²⁴ Arendt 1958: 200.

²⁵ Arendt 1958: 203.

²⁶ See Haubold 2000.

The *Odyssey*, too, opens with a vivid depiction of the depletion of power: Telemachus is able to reconstitute (if only temporarily) with Athena's help a public space that has been vacant for twenty years. Telemachus looks to the people precisely because he does not have the "power" to defend his household (*Od.* 2.62). The suitors, like Agamemnon, enforce passivity and silence on the seer who speaks of justice (*Od.* 2.177–80) and the people (*Od.* 2.239–41, 244–51). Like Agamemnon, who feeds on his people (*dēmoboros*) (*Il.* 1. 231), the suitors also use the public forum to justify their own devouring of Odysseus' household (*Od.* 2.74–79, 85–88). And unlike Agamemnon, who inadvertently dissolves the political field and must find a way to reestablish its power, the suitors end by deliberately dispersing the people, "each to his own holdings," so that they will pose no threat (*Od.* 2.252; also 2.257–59).

The absence of institutions makes the play of power all the more dramatic because there is little to hold things together apart from the activity of the people. That is why Mentor, as much as Achilles, assails the quiet complicity of the people. But this fragility of the political field also points to a paradoxical aspect of the epics. Force, violence, and deception permeate the Homeric world. Indeed, Odysseus' ability to deceive (as opposed to engage in outward violence) is seen as representing a new Archaic hero who possesses the skills to adapt and endure in a new world that demands "change and innovation."²⁷ But the actual survival of these Homeric communities, a concern with durability that was likely an ongoing concern of early Iron Age settlements, is continually imperiled when that violence and deception become modes of political action. As an exploration of power, the Homeric epics appear to us as more than the palimpsest of political forms: they are a more fundamental exploration of the human forces that threaten to destroy a community from within.

LEADERSHIP AND THE POLITICIZATION OF *THEMIS*

The epics explore, as well, the forces that bind a community together. One such political force is claims of leadership. A long-standing and still-employed perspective views the authority of the Homeric *basileus*, or leader, as premised on his unique power to interpret and enforce *themis*, or customary right and law. Scholars holding this view have

²⁷ Dougherty 2001: 162; also Foley 1978: 8–9.

sought to develop their case by identifying etymological associations between the *basileus* and the divine, noting the privileged position of the *basileus* as holder of the scepter of Zeus. Authority, from this perspective, flows downward from Zeus, to the *basileus*, to his followers. Not surprisingly, this has often led to an emphasis on the coercive aspects of kingly rule exemplified in the possession of the scepter. Even those who have rejected these divine associations with Homeric leadership have still emphasized the foundation of rule, and the defense of *themis*, as originating in the household. From this perspective, the *basileus* rules by personal prerogative and arguments about *themis* appear as a “purely private matter.”²⁸

The *basileus* cannot act unilaterally, though. Limits on Homeric leadership have been seen generally as derived from the need of the leader to attract and maintain a loyal following. The result is a *basileus* who is at the center of an exchange system that is organized into a weak redistributive system. Understood as an aspect of this exchange system, *themis* emerges “as a dynamic effort to share resources.” Even though the historical trajectory of decisions about *themis* was toward increasing civic arbitration, *themis* in the epics is still viewed as a form of “oracular knowledge” that “endowed [the leader’s] speech with an illocutionary force unavailable to other participants.” When articulated, judgments of *themis* “rested on reasons that were not open to discussion.”²⁹

I do not disagree with the view that the performance of *themistes* is both linked to a comprehension of a cosmic order and restricted to an elite. In fact, the oracular basis of these claims ties into my argument (discussed later) about the persistence of charismatic claims to authority by leaders. But these claims exist in uneasy tension with what I would describe as the politicization of the performance of *themistes* that encompasses both a critique of judgments of *themis* as a prerogative of the king and a broadening of *themis* as a public claim (albeit one restricted primarily to the elite).

The danger of the notion of *themis* as a prerogative of the leader, a view articulated both by Agamemnon (*Il.* 1.135–38; also 9.160–61) and Nestor (*Il.* 9.98–102; 11.702–4), arises when one is unable to separate one’s private desires from public claims to the distribution of resources. This is ultimately the basis of Achilles’ critique of Agamemnon. Thus, Achilles employs a language of venality to characterize Agamemnon’s motivations: greedy (*Il.* 1.122, 149, 171), vindictive (*Il.* 1.230), and

²⁸ Finley 1979: 110.

²⁹ Farenga 2006: 124, 125, 110.

devouring (*Il.* 1.231). Even Nestor seems to revise his earlier stance, later claiming that Agamemnon took Achilles' war prize by force "against the will of the rest of us" (*Il.* 9.107–8). When the political space becomes subject to the whim of the leader, then, as Achilles points out, no one will be left who will readily (*prophrōn*) obey (*Il.* 1.150). The ultimate consequence of such rule is borne out in the land of the Cyclopes where each man is the law (*Od.* 9.114–15). Or, closer to Odysseus' home, the lawlessness of the suitors exemplifies the rule by prerogative not of one man, but of the elite acting (and devouring) each by his own rule.

As works of political thought the epics play out a notion of *themis* as a political and public claim. *Themis* is neither formalized nor is it a right in the contemporary sense of an individual possession or entitlement protected in law. Furthermore, judgments of *themis* are not available to all members of the community, but remain very much an aspiration of the elite. What the epics convey is the process by which *themistes*, as a set of claims (however limited) about one's share in the life of the community, are themselves products of ongoing, negotiated relationships. Applied to issues of leadership, *themis* is tied to the maintenance of a collegial space among the elite in which there is a separation between public responsibilities and private affairs.³⁰ That is to say, we see in the epics a critique of leadership as premised on personal prerogative.

Themis emerges as a public claim on the leader rather than a claim of the leader. There are several aspects of this politicization of *themis*. First, both young and old men of the community, and not just the *basileus*, can invoke *Themis*, the goddess who summons and breaks up assemblies (*Od.* 2.28–32, 68–69; *Il.* 20.4–5). By way of historical comparison, one of the earliest written law codes, the Gortyn law code, begins with an invocation to the gods as a basis for constituting a political and legal space in which good judgments can be formed. Second, in such a public space the community "deal[s] out rights" (*Il.* 11.806–7). Among these actions is the apportionment of resources, for which the assembly is responsible (and is held responsible) (*Il.* 1.126; 2.227–28; 11.806–7; 16.387–88). Third, the assembly becomes the way in which *themistes* can be made part of a "corporate political memory"

³⁰ Mention of shared decision making among the elite appears at *Il.* 2.53–86, 402–40; 3.146–60; 4.322–23, 344; 7.323–44; 9.70–178, 422; 12.210–50; 13.726–47; 14.27–134; 15.283–84; 18.243–313, 497–508, 510–11; 22.99–110; *Od.* 3.127; 11.509–11; 16.242, 419–20; 22.230.

and not simply the result of the private interpretation of the leader.³¹ Agamemnon's own claim to authority based on a divine lineage, and his belief that it is *themis* for him to test his troops (*Il.* 2.73), is dealt a serious blow when, leaning upon the scepter inherited from Zeus, he lies about a dream that was itself falsely planted by Zeus. Agamemnon subsequently loses complete control over the men.

Diomedes, later in the *Iliad*, points to a fourth aspect of *themis* as a public enactment when he claims his right to speak in assembly. Responding to Agamemnon's suggestion to retreat, Diomedes says that he "will be first to fight with your folly" and phrases his argument with an unconditional "is": "as is my right, lord, in this assembly" (*Il.* 9.33). This claim is noteworthy because it reflects a change in Diomedes' own understanding of a political space from his earlier silence when he is portrayed as standing "in awe before the majesty of the king's rebuking" (*Il.* 4.402; also one of the "nonentities" [*Il.* 1.231]). Diomedes appeals to a notion of *themis* as impersonal, not as a possession of the *basileus* that is exercised over others but as a public claim that the leader must administer.

Rights are not born of philosophy nor, for that matter, are they born of contracts. Rather, the framing of rights consists of two ongoing processes: the process of regularization and the process of situational adjustment. Whereas the first process derives from an attempt to create stability by establishing laws and institutions, the second process emerges from the interpretation and redefinition of rules to cover new situations, concerns, and interests, or to create new relationships. Rights, from this perspective, are not restricted to codified or abstract expressions. Rather, rights are defined by, and in turn define, a set of enacted relationships between actors within a public field.

The funeral games, which are often seen as ritualized enactments of the values and crises of a society, play out this alternate role of the political leader. The leader, in this case Achilles, does not act by personal prerogative but is implicated in issues of exchange and compensation that revisit the earlier crisis of distribution, extend beyond family and kin groups, and involve negotiation between groups about the terms and basis of apportionment. In such transactions, Achilles acts within traditional norms of gift exchange. But he also displays an important aspect of a deliberative mentality by anticipating and recognizing the claims of others. In such recognition Achilles goes some distance toward

³¹ Cook 1995: 98. See *Od.* 9.106–7, 112–15, and lack of assembly with suitors.

answering his own question of how a leader can obtain ready obedience. But Achilles' seemingly limitless access to prizes sidesteps a more pressing issue: how do political systems cope with resource scarcity?

ENTER THE PEOPLE

An increasing number of scholars have taken note of the role of the people (variously referred to as the *laos*, *dēmos*, and *plēthos*) in the epics.³² This role, though, is by no means clear. The people do not initiate action, but they are not simply quiet, either. Scholars have often depicted the people as a “docile tool” who “neither voted nor decided.”³³ Seaford, for example, sees the Homeric assemblies as “embody[ing] the ineffectiveness or foolishness of the mass.”³⁴ Yet, the leaders appear at times to be interested in the tide of public opinion. Furthermore, leaders continually imagine judgments and face the judgments of the people.³⁵ Difficulties of interpreting these judgments politically are exacerbated both by the nature of epic poetry, which seeks to tell a story rather than convey history or social change, and by the paucity of knowledge about the role of the people in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.

Royal models of divine kingship and *oikos* models of the leader as ruling by a household form of might do not take us very far in explaining the role of the people. More helpful have been attempts to place leadership in the context of an emergent, and increasingly self-conscious, *dēmos*. Two approaches have been particularly prominent for interpreting what the epics are saying about the role of the people. The first is to view the epics as ideological productions that play an active

³² Though *laos* and *dēmos* are not synonymous, their meanings overlap (e.g., *Il.* 18.301; *Od.* 16.95–96, 114). Both terms refer to the people of a community. *Laos* and *laoi* often refer to the followers of a leader whereas *dēmos* refers to both a named territory and the people of the territory (see LfgrE 275–78, 1633–44; Donlan 1970, 1989; Haubold 2000). *Plēthos* seems to refer frequently to an undifferentiated multitude (see *Il.* 2.488; 11.305, 360, 405; 15.295; 17.31, 221; 20.197; 22.458; *Od.* 11.514; 16.105). *Plēthos* is not used as a pejorative term for *dēmos* or *laos*, though. *Plēthos*, *dēmos*, and *laos* are all used to refer to the mass of disorderly people (compare *Il.* 2.143, 198, and 191). And the *plēthos* are sometimes portrayed sympathetically (*Il.* 2.278; 9.641; 15.305).

³³ Andreyev 1991: 342; Finley 1979: 80.

³⁴ Seaford 2004: 182.

³⁵ Imagined judgments: *Il.* 6.460–61, 469; 7.87–91, 299–302; 22.106–7; 23.573–78; *Od.* 6.275–84; 21.253–55, 323–29, 331–33. See Haubold 2000; Scodel 2002.

role in the stratification of society. For Morris, the epics appear as an “ideological device” that legitimates the “class interests” of an exploitative aristocracy. The *basileis* are “glorified” and the *dēmos* are “ignored” almost “to the point of total exclusion.”³⁶ Thalmann also reads the epics as an aristocratic strategy to legitimize its economic and political position. The textual strategy of the epics, as they are “composed for and conditioned by the interests of a military and landowning elite,” is to show how challenges to an aristocratic ideal lead to social disruption that can be repaired only by a restoration of hierarchical bonds.³⁷

No doubt the epics express elite ideals, and I would not want to understate the elements of conflict between different groups. But, as Scodel has recently observed, whether there was a “single, uniform, Panhellenic aristocratic ideology to promote” is questionable, especially since the epics appealed to different local audiences that were comprised of different groups, including the people.³⁸ Moreover, such views overlook the frequent, often critical, voice of the people. A second approach, attentive to this voice and articulated by Raafflaub, has posited a more interactive model of *polis* development in which the people and aristocracy developed alongside each other as those who owned land and fought to defend the territory of the community also participated in decisions of the community.³⁹

Raafflaub’s argument challenges notions of a sharp rupture between a Homeric world and the emergence of democracy. But in positing this evolutionary trajectory, there is a danger in smoothing out the extraordinary volatility both of the Archaic Age and of Homeric politics in which, at various points, oligarchic, tyrannical, demagogic, and democratic elements seem to have been present. We can still view the epics as a reflection on emergent authority relations, but they are relations that contain within them both authoritarian and democratic implications.

On the one hand, Homeric leaders make claims to privileged status: claims of divine favor and lineage, extraordinary prowess, wisdom, wealth, and might. In Weber’s language, we see aspects of charismatic authority, in which authority is considered valid because the leader is seen as having some extraordinary personal, heroic, or divine traits that justify his leadership.⁴⁰ On the other hand, these charismatic attributes

³⁶ Morris 1986: 123–24.

³⁷ Thalmann 1998: 13, 284.

³⁸ Scodel 2002: 180.

³⁹ Raafflaub 1991: 222–30.

⁴⁰ *Od.* 2.12–13, 703–10; 8.19; *Il.* 1.54–55; 3.181, 224; 7.403–404, 418.

and authority undergo a reinterpretation when they are seen as derived from the people's recognition. Leaders, though retaining charismatic elements, come to premise their personal authority on recognition by the ruled. The people do not vote, nor do they make binding decisions. Furthermore, there are not formalized rules for succession to office, for responsibilities of office, for proposing and enacting legislation, for articulating interests, or for organizing the polity. Decisions are "enacted," instead, with minimal, and inconsistently applied, rules or procedures. The term "enacted" is useful because it draws attention to the public aspects of the activity without, in turn, stating that there is a formalized or democratic process. Within the public space, we see the emergence of a form of plebiscitary politics in which leaders play to the audience, seeking to persuade, cajole, or elicit support.⁴¹ But this alters the nature of authority as leaders draft their appeals in anticipation of a response.

We see, for example, leaders assemble the people for important decisions that affect the entire community. There is evidence not only of the formalization of public assemblies, but also of the importance of the people in witnessing, and even influencing, decisions about public matters, the distribution of goods, the adjudication of disputes, and the conduct of foreign relations.⁴² Both epics open with the people called to assembly, an assembly that is associated with some "public matter" that a member of the community may want to put forward and argue (*Od.* 2.32).⁴³ Even the infrequency of the meetings in Ithaca, suggestive of the near breakdown of the community, is juxtaposed to their frequency and formalization elsewhere (see *Od.* 10.114–15; 15.468).

More than just affirming decisions, the people seem to play a part in legitimating decisions and even directing action.⁴⁴ The assembly

⁴¹ See Hammer 2005.

⁴² Instances of calling assemblies for public matters: *Il.* 2.73–75; 7.345–378; 18.245–314; 18.497–503; *Od.* 8.10–45; contrast to Cyclops: *Od.* 9.114–15; formalization (role for heralds): *Il.* 2.99; 9.11; *Od.* 2.6–7; formalization (proper seating): *Il.* 2.96–97, 99; 9.13; *Od.* 2.14; 8.5–7; public matters: *Il.* 1.54–305; 2.84–398; 2.788–808; 7.345–79, 381–411, 414–20; 9.9–79; 11.806–7; 18.243–313; 19.34–237; *Od.* 3.126–50; 8.5–45; 16.361; 20.146; distribution of goods: *Il.* 1.125–26; 2.227–28; 11.704; *Od.* 13.14–15; adjudication: *Il.* 18.497–508; foreign relations: *Il.* 3.205–24; 3.245–345; 7.66–205; 11.122–42; *Od.* 21.15–21; other mentions: *Od.* 10.114–15; 15.468. See Raaflaub 1991, 1997, 1998; Schofield 1986; Hölkeskamp 2002: 311–18.

⁴³ There is a distinction made between public (*dēmion*) and private (*idion*) matters (*Od.* 4.314, 3.82).

⁴⁴ Legitimating decisions: *Il.* 1.22, 376; 2.72–73; 18.310–12; directing action: *Od.* 21.17; 14.239; 16.424–27.

is described as the “voice of the people” (*Od.* 15.468, trans. modified). Interestingly, this voice is sometimes depicted in the language of the heroic war cry, as when the people “shouted” their support for Diomedes’ proposal (*Il.* 7.403; see also *Il.* 2.149). In the competitive world of the warrior, the cry corresponds to strength, courage, and individual distinction.⁴⁵ By depicting the people as shouting their approval, Homer not only reveals the force of the people, but also lends their voice some legitimacy by associating it with the agonistic, heroic world. Conversely, Mentor expresses anger with the people precisely because they sit “in silence” and do not try to stop the suitors through words, “though they are so few, and you so many” (*Od.* 2.239–41; also *Il.* 1.231).

Leaders might be able to play to the people, they might even be able to incite them, but they can hardly control them. Thersites provides perhaps the earliest example of the challenge of *parrhēsia*, or frank speech, in his public critique of Agamemnon’s leadership. Along these same lines, Bakker has identified how *phēm̄is*, which is connected to openness (often unwanted), is associated with the people and the assembly.⁴⁶ But in such openness is potential turmoil. Agamemnon gives some sense of the tumult of the public assembly when he asks how, with the “great murmur” of the crowd, anyone can listen or speak (*Il.* 19.81). Although the people are able to recognize good counsel, they are also easily swayed by demagogic appeals, owing to the charismatic elements that are still associated with leadership. In playing to the people to demonstrate their own political prowess, leaders can imperil the good of the community.⁴⁷

Both epics, as Donlan has observed, exhibit a “conscious perception of the social dangers which attend deterioration of the integrity of the [social] structure.”⁴⁸ The competition for power – whether of leaders battling for the applause of the people or the suitors competing for rank – threatens to tear the community apart. One can see articulated in the epics a political ethic that seeks to join the competitive

⁴⁵ Comparison to noise: *Il.* 14.393–401; *Od.* 9.392; personal prowess: *Il.* 5.297–302; 8.321; 16.784–85; 18.160, 1228–29; 20.285; *Od.* 4.454; communal strength: *Il.* 13.834–35; 15.312–13; 16.78–79; 17.262–66; divine terror: *Il.* 5.784–92, 859–63; 11.10–14; 14.147–52; 15.321–27; 20.48–53.

⁴⁶ Bakker 2002: 139–40. Examples: *Il.* 10.207; *Od.* 6.273–75; 14.239; 15.468; 16.75; 19.527; 24.201.

⁴⁷ See *Il.* 2.142, 149, 155, 337; 12.211–14, 229; 14.84, 92–93; 18.311–13; *Od.* 3.137–40, 148–50.

⁴⁸ Donlan 1979: 59; also Wilson 2002: 251–53.

excellences of the warrior with these activities of the public assembly.⁴⁹ What emerges is a form of political heroism in which greatness consists of public speech actions (or *muthoi*) that involve a “performance” and a claim to authority “before an audience.”⁵⁰ One wins glory through one’s words in assembly as one speaks for, and persuades others of, the community good (*Il.* 1.490; 9.441; *Od.* 8.169–73). And one risks bringing ruin to the people.⁵¹ As Schofield comments in discussing the counsel that Diomedes offers in Book 9, “the crucial point for the present is that Diomedes’ speech is in its own way as much a feat of prowess as one of his exploits on the battlefield.”⁵² One sees a notion of distinction and acclaim that corresponds to the words of the elite in the assembly of the people (and, in turn, a model of deliberation that the people might emulate).

The picture of politics here is one in which charismatic and participatory elements are held in tension. We do not have to read the people out of the evidence any more than we have to impute to them a consciousness that is unwarranted by the evidence. The evidence we have, and that is certainly limited, points to not just a belief in the leader but an interaction between leaders and led that would fuel historically both demagogic excess and democratic reforms. Plebiscitary politics provided a public space, often volatile, in which a vocabulary of democracy could develop.

GENDER

Scholarship has continued to broaden our understanding of the political depth of the epics by viewing them through the lens of gender. Feminist scholarship focuses largely on the dynamics of power by examining the ways in which politics constructs and reinforces social categories of gender. As Nancy Felson and Laura Slatkin write, “Inasmuch as Homeric epic conjures up a total world, the gendering of its conflicts, contradictions and values inform both the social order represented (and disturbed) within the poems and the metaphysical – indeed ideological – orders there limned.”⁵³ One approach has been to read the epics (and

⁴⁹ Competitive excellences: Adkins 1960. Cooperative virtues: Long 1970.

⁵⁰ Martin 1989: 37.

⁵¹ See Haubold 2000. Examples: *Il.* 1.117; 2.115; 6.327; 7.345–53; 9.641; 14.83–102; 22.104–7; *Od.* 3.126–29.

⁵² Schofield 1986: 14.

⁵³ Felson and Slatkin 2004: 92.

ourselves, in our enjoyment of the epics) as complicit in the construction of gender relations. Murnaghan, for example, sees Penelope as bowing ultimately to a world that will not allow her *mētis*, or cunning, to equal Odysseus'.⁵⁴ Doherty employs narratology to reveal an "interpretive hierarchy" in the *Odyssey* that invites women to identify with women who rival male heroes in cunning, but are rewarded for subordinating their purposes to male goals.⁵⁵ And Wohl argues that the *Odyssey* explores alternate political arrangements, from the primitive pastoral individuality of the Cyclopes to the royal model of the Phaeacians, only to give to Ithacan political arrangements "an air of inevitability" by making these arrangements look natural.⁵⁶ Control over women is reestablished to counter their potentially dangerous sexual and politically subversive power.

Others have explored how gender provides a more critical perspective on the heroic world. A gendered reading of the *Iliad* views Achilles' response to Agamemnon and the Embassy as "a critique of the broader exchange-logic animating war and a meditation on its apparent cause – traffic in women as a medium of contended honour among men."⁵⁷ The women, whether in mourning or in response to the warriors, continually evince a critical consciousness that war, however noble, threatens to destroy the familial institutions that it is intended to protect. The tension between the battlefield and the household is cast poignantly into relief with Andromache's final words: where Hector desires to perform some great deed so that he will be remembered forever, Andromache longs only for some small word by which she can remember him (*Il.* 24.743–45).

The *Odyssey*, perhaps not surprisingly given the centrality of Penelope and the range of female characters, has drawn more attention than the *Iliad*. A dead Agamemnon warns Odysseus of the treachery of women. But Penelope points to a more ambiguous statement about the role of women – as matching the cunning and restraint of Odysseus, as pointing to the narrative indeterminacy of the epic (and of identity generally) that reveals the constructed nature of social relationships, as a sign that refuses to be mute, as able to shape her own life, as prefiguring emphasis on "ethical norms such as justice and on the quieter values that promote social cohesion" that lead to the restoration of Ithacan order, as a bardic figure, and perhaps even as a critique of (or a way

⁵⁴ Murnaghan 1987.

⁵⁵ Doherty 2001: 127; 1995: 192.

⁵⁶ Wohl 1993: 19.

⁵⁷ Felson and Slatkin 2004: 96–97.

to imagine alternatives to) the male world.⁵⁸ Other female characters, such as the Sirens and Helen, are seen, as well, as subverting the truth claims of the epics because of their ability to use the language of epic culture while speaking truth and lies and contributing to benefit and harm.⁵⁹ As Foley writes in her seminal article on reverse similes, the comparisons (of men to women, women to men, fathers to children, swineherd to father, etc.) “seem to suggest both a sense of identity between people in different social and sexual roles and a loss of stability, an inversion of the normal.” Odysseus’ recovery of the household is “symbolic of a wider restoration of his kingdom on the same pattern.” The politics of this restoration not only suggest the interdependence of male and female roles, but also that success “must be won with a special form of gentle, uncoercive negotiation.”⁶⁰

POLITICAL ETHICS

A common refrain in scholarship has been to view the *Odyssey* as portraying a more advanced ethical conception of human action than the *Iliad*. This view is premised on the overwhelming sense, captured in Achilles’ encounter with Priam in the *Iliad*, that the gods are the cause of mortal suffering whereas in the *Odyssey* humans are seen as responsible for their own suffering. Even with this distinction, the values depicted in the epics are seen as decidedly inferior to notions of morality that developed later, which are premised on abstract and universal principles rather than cultural norms. Homeric individuals are seen as functioning unreflectively, conforming to external cultural norms and guided by honor and shame, rather than acting and reflecting upon internal motivations regarding what is morally right and wrong. That scholars would use terms from two different linguistic traditions – ethics from Greek, morals from Latin – to suggest the evolution of moral thought should raise some questions about retrofitting moral categories onto ethical practices. But even accepting the conventional distinction that ethics are articulated in practices and morals by reference to universal norms, we can still follow Ricoeur in arguing for “the primacy of ethics

⁵⁸ Matching cunning: de Jong 1994; Winkler 1990; narrative indeterminacy: Katz 1991; sign: Zeitlin 1996: 19–52; shape life: Felson-Rubin 1994: 3; quieter values: Foley 1995: 105; Vetter 2005: 33–34; bardic figure: Clayton 2004: 24; alternatives: Felson-Rubin 1994; Felson and Slatkin 2004: 105.

⁵⁹ Doherty 1995.

⁶⁰ Foley 1978: 8, 19.

over morality,” or “the aim over the norm.”⁶¹ This aim, furthermore, is examined in one’s dialogic and narrative relationship with others as one develops a conception of one’s own worth in relationship to the worth of others.

From this perspective, the *Iliad* shows how desires can become subject to reflection and reevaluation, not because there is a non-desiring self who can look at the desiring self, but because these desires – and the implications of these desires – are seen as impacting one’s own sense of worth. Briefly stated, in the Homeric world honor and shame operate as judgments (or anticipated judgments) of one’s value, not only by society, but also by individuals as they see themselves through the eyes of society. We can think of this valuation of the self as “self-esteem.”⁶² Esteem, in the sense used here, does not denote some authentic inner self but is *an image of oneself in relationship to others* that necessarily involves questions of how this self relates to “the demands, needs, claims, desires, and, generally, the lives of other people.”⁶³ The ethical self is an enacted self that must interpret and apply the standards of a community as well as encounter occasions in which community expectations are ambiguous, contradictory, or unsatisfactory. That is to say, the *Iliad* points to how esteem – as a sense of one’s worth – can serve as a basis for ethical reflection.⁶⁴

With the death of Patroclus, Achilles experiences a diminished sense of himself, a loss of worth. That sense of injury is not reducible to a simple failure of Achilles to live up to the social standards of a warrior culture, if for no other reason than the standards are quite ambiguous on this point. Achilles’ initial reaction to the violation of his worth, as well as his later refusal of gifts, all seem consistent with the norms of a warrior society, yet come into conflict with Achilles’ sense of failure to stand by Patroclus. The stimulus for Achilles’ restatement of what counts as a worthwhile life is the immediacy of the pain that results from acting on his desires; namely, his desire to restore his esteem by humiliating Agamemnon. What is clarified for Achilles is what he desires most – not the humiliation of Agamemnon but the return of Patroclus. As Achilles’ sense of worth appears implicated in

⁶¹ Ricoeur 1992: 170–71.

⁶² Cairns 1993: 16. On the reflective aspects of honor and shame, see Hammer 2002: 170–87.

⁶³ Williams 1985: 12. See also Ricoeur 1992: 172.

⁶⁴ Helpful explorations of the *Iliad* as engaged in ethical reflections, including discussions of wrath and pity, are made by Schein 1984; Crotty 1994; Muellner 1996; Zanker 1994; Hammer 2002. Applied to the *Odyssey*, see Farenga 2006: 195–205.

his attachments to others, his desires, too, must be brought into line with these broader considerations. Achilles' meeting with Priam reflects these considerations as his desire to mutilate Hector's corpse gives way to pity. The story Achilles shares with Priam in Book 24 arises from recognition that human attachments render us vulnerable to loss and responsible for care.

The importance of the epic is that it invites reflection on the exigencies of human enactment. The epic moves us to a comprehension of ethical relationships with others, relationships that are grounded in contingency, particularity, and vulnerability. As we are drawn into this world, we come to see ourselves as another, not in an empathetic moment in which we become the Other, but in an act of initiative in which, as we share a world of human enactment, we come to see ourselves as both doers and sufferers.⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt has pointed to the political implications of this recognition, a recognition that rests on two actions: releasing (or what Arendt refers to as forgiveness) and promising.⁶⁶ Releasing points to the possibility of projecting the world into the future by freeing oneself from a confinement (whether through the desire for vengeance or inconsolable grief) to the past. And promising points to the ways in which individuals, recognizing their connectedness, can bind themselves to each other and project themselves into the future. The story Homer tells, like the story Achilles tells Priam, is one in which we are moved toward a recognition of a shared world, a recognition that arises not from outside but from within a world constituted by experience.

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

For Levinas, Odysseus' travels chart the path of western philosophy: the "adventure in the world was but a return to his native island – complacency in the Same, misunderstanding of the Other."⁶⁷ Odysseus' travels mark, for Levinas, the refusal to engage the Other as an ethical being who cannot be subsumed into one's own self-knowledge. In seeking to revise this conception of Odysseus' travels, Hartog interprets these voyages as a series of encounters with the Other that map out the boundaries of identity and, in turn, point to the ambiguities

⁶⁵ Arendt 1958: 190.

⁶⁶ Arendt 1958: 236–47.

⁶⁷ Levinas 2003: 26.

and confusion of those boundaries. There is an encounter with different practices: lands without cultivation, without boundaries, without sociability, and without memory.⁶⁸ But there are also encounters with oneself as something different. Odysseus encounters himself in song, becomes “no-man,” returns to an Ithaca that now seems foreign and dangerous to him (*Od.* 13.200–3), and takes on the form of a marginalized, itinerant beggar. He is “both present and absent, self and other at the same time.”⁶⁹ As Hartog writes, “Odysseus, in his travels, through the very movement of a return journey that is constantly blocked or deferred, sketches in the outlines of a Greek identity, encompasses it. He marks out frontiers (between the human and the divine, for instance) or rather, he, the One who Endures, tests them out, at the risk of losing himself altogether.”⁷⁰ Austin argues in this same vein that Odysseus progresses through increasingly complex systems of order as a “preparatory education” for his return to Ithaca.⁷¹

Others have sought to provide a historical context to this question of identity by showing how the epics emerge at a time when Greek conceptions of space and time are being altered by commerce, colonization, and mobility.⁷² For Rose, the *Odyssey* plays out, by way of a “psychological profile” that includes “fearful ambivalence toward females and pervasive oral anxieties,” the concerns of a colonizing aristocratic class that is both aware of the “crimes” they have committed in their “aggressive acquisitiveness” and yet proud of and aiming to validate their achievements.⁷³ Dougherty casts the *Odyssey* as a more forward-looking enterprise. To theorize, as Dougherty writes, is to leave home.⁷⁴ Homer theorizes about a new Archaic world, one that Odysseus, in some sense, re-founds in his return to Ithaca. Cook similarly notes that *mētis*, more than force, relies on the restraint of one’s “physical appetites” – something not accomplished by Odysseus’ crew, Polyphemus, and the suitors – that becomes “aligned with Greek culture and cultural values.”⁷⁵ Deneen argues, as well, that Odysseus’ ability to act with both moderation and violence gives him the qualities necessary to establish a new community, but adds that such qualities

⁶⁸ Also Foley 1978: 8; Cook 1995: 56–59.

⁶⁹ Clayton 2004: 65.

⁷⁰ Hartog 2001: 4.

⁷¹ Austin 1975: 132.

⁷² See Malkin 1998: 10, 14.

⁷³ Rose 1992: 140.

⁷⁴ Dougherty 2001: 4.

⁷⁵ Cook 1995: 64, 48.

are not suitable for rule over the long term. Such a limit on violence is “motivated and ultimately secured through the people’s devices,” a call for justice suggestive of the seeds of democracy.⁷⁶ And Farenga suggests that the encounter with cultural and social Others reflects “the development of moral consciousness” necessary for a democratic and deliberative self in a heterogeneous *polis*.⁷⁷

Yet, Levinas raises a troubling question: what ultimately is Odysseus’ objective? The terrifying part, as Buchan provocatively suggests, is not that Odysseus nearly fails in his return, but that he “comes all too close to succeeding” in fulfilling his fantasy of a return of Ithaca to his paternal power.⁷⁸ The fantasy is unfulfilled because he is prevented ultimately from massacring the remaining adult males on the island. Like in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* presents us with characters who imagine themselves as self-sufficient, Achilles of Book 9 and Odysseus (through his trickery).⁷⁹ Each of these expressions of invulnerability is, interestingly enough, associated with individuals who place themselves, at some point, outside human community. Achilles seeks to demonstrate his worth by killing, rather than saving, Achaeans. And Odysseus’ *mētis* is a “tool of deceit” that, while necessary for civilization, can appear as “criminal” when directed against one’s own community.⁸⁰ But both poems confront the audience with the untenability of this illusion: Achilles experiences a loss of a part of himself with the death of Patroclus and Odysseus’ wiliness is purchased at the price of the death of every comrade with whom he set sail. So potentially disruptive is the chaotic violence at the end of the *Odyssey* that the gods impose a forgetting so that the deeds of either side will never be publicly debated or performed (*Od.* 24.481–86).⁸¹

The last several decades have witnessed a transformation in our understanding of the epics as works of political thought, from a view of the epics as a compilation of myths and legends that speak more to the irrationality of the cosmos than the possibility of politics to an increasing attempt to locate the epics in their historical context. Even that historicity has undergone substantial revision. The epics are no longer seen as referring to a Mycenaean past; rather, the political backdrop has been slowly pushed forward, from a view of the epics

⁷⁶ Deneen 2000: 66, 69.

⁷⁷ Farenga 2006: 229.

⁷⁸ Buchan 2004: 3; also Bakker 2002: 137.

⁷⁹ Buchan 2004: 14; also Hammer 2002: 93–113.

⁸⁰ Cook 1995: 9.

⁸¹ See Farenga 2006: 258–59.

as depicting a functioning, Dark Age social system, to attempts to identify references to the emergent Archaic *polis*. Against this historical backdrop the epics emerge not just as a record of these embryonic political institutions and functions, but also as a reflection on the new demands of community organization. The political brilliance of the epics lies in the intensity with which the contours of political life emerge through the interaction – often the collision – of beliefs, goals, interests, assumptions, and aspirations: the challenge of authority, the near dissolution of the political field, the encounter with and potential incorporation of different groups, and the emergence of public claims that would play out in the tumultuous politics of Archaic Greece. The challenge of political thought is to remain attentive to the historical, cultural, and poetic context from which the epics emerged without, in turn, reducing interpretation to that context.

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