3

Thersites, Odysseus, and the Social Order

Andrea Kouklanakis

The *Iliad* contains various exchanges of formulaic speeches of blame and praise between its characters, and, indeed, many of the speeches one encounters in the poem serve one or the other function.¹ In this essay I will examine Thersites' blame speech beginning in *II*. 2.225 and Odysseus' blame speech in reply in *II*. 2.246-264. Although the analysis of both Thersites' and Odysseus' speeches undeniably reveals a poetics of blame,² the passage in which these speeches appear also discloses certain ambiguities of a moral and social nature.

These ambiguities emerge from the structure of the passage on two distinct levels: the narrative and the speeches. Further, these two levels appear to be in tension with one another. For the purpose of this essay I will be treating both speeches—Tersites' and Odysseus'—as a mise-en-scène within the narrative. On the one hand, I argue that the tension between these two levels may indicate a certain Homeric ambivalence in the representation of the dynamics of power between the two characters and perhaps also in the poem as a whole. On the other hand, I intend to show that these moral ambiguities are critically underscored by the relatively liminal position of both characters.

Since Odysseus appears as an epic hero, he may well be a product of a historical transition in social values, a transition toward a set of values by which his quasi *homo novus* status is beginning to gain importance vis-à-vis an older tradition of the heroic standard based on nobility and physical

---

¹ For further analysis of formulaic speeches, particularly praise and blame speeches, see Nagy 1979; Martin 1989; Vodoklys 1992.
² Ibid.
prowess. As we also shall see, Thersites’ character is likewise not altogether fixed as a common fighting man, but, as with Odysseus, his character seems to shift. It is this relative fluidity of both characters that prevents their interaction from being strictly speaking a tension between opposites along the lines of power.

At the beginning of Book 2, Zeus, fulfilling the promise he had earlier made to Thetis, sends a deceitful dream to Agamemnon with the misleading message that the time had come for the Greeks to attack the Trojans and assure victory for themselves (Il. 2.26-30):

"νῦν δ’ ἐμέθεν ξύνες ὥκα· Διὸς δὲ τοι ἀγγελός εἰμι, ὃς σεῦ ἀνευθεν ἐών μέγα κηδεται ἥδ’ ἐλεσιρεὶ. θωρηξαί σε κέλευσε κόρη κομώντος Ἀχαιός πανουδίη· νῦν γάρ κεν ἐλοις πόλιν εὐρυάγυιαν Τρώων."

"But now heed me, quickly. Because, you see, I am the messenger of the god who, being afar, cares greatly for you and has compassion. He orders you to arm the longhaired Achaeans with all haste. For now you might capture the broad-streeted city of Troy."

Agamemnon summons the Greek host in order to tell them about the dream’s message, but first he decides to test the courage of the Greek warriors, by proposing that they leave and sail home:

"ἄλλ’ ἀγεθ’, ὡς ἄν ἐγὼ εἴπω, πειθώμεθα πάντες· φεύγωμεν σὺν νησὶ φίλην ὡς πατρίδα γαίαιν· ού γὰρ ἔτι Τροίῃν αἱρήσομεν εὐρυάγυιαν."

(Il. 2.139-141)

"But carry on as I shall declare. Let us all comply. Let us flee with our ships to our dear fatherland since we no longer shall capture broad-streeted Troy."
His test does not turn out according to his anticipation, and the fighting men begin to make a rush to their ships very eagerly indeed, as the following simile indicates (Il. 2.147-150):

\[\text{ως δ' ὁτε κινήσῃ Ζέφυρος βαθὺ λήιον ἐλθὼν, λάβρος ἐπαιγίζων, ἕπϊ τ' ἥμυει ἀσταχύσεσιν, ὡς τῶν πᾶο' ἀγορὴ κινῆθη: τοί δ' ἀλαλητῷ νῆς ἐπ' ἐσσεύοντο, ποδῶν δ' ὑπένερθε κονίη ἵστατ' ἀειρομένη.}
\]

And just as when far-reaching Zephyr stirs when it comes to the field, storming violently, the field bows down with its ears of grain. In the same way as these, the whole assembly was stirred and with a shouting, they rushed to the ships and beneath their feet, a rising dust stood.

Odysseus manages to reassemble them in order to give a speech, and once they are seated again, Thersites stands up and tries to appeal to the warriors, that they should in fact abandon the war and desert Agamemnon. Before presenting Thersites' speech, let us consider the narrative introduction to him and to his words. It is strong, colorful, and it predisposes the audience unfavorably against him (Il. 2.211-224):

\[\text{"Αλλοι μὲν ρ' ἔζωντο, ἑρῆτυθεν δὲ καθ' ἕδρας: Θερσίτης δ' ἔτι μοῦνος ἀμετροεὶς ἐκολῶσα, ὃς ἔπεα φρεῖσι ἤσιν ἀκοσμά τε πολλά τε ἠδη, μάγι, ἀτάρ οὐ κατά κόσμον, ἐριζέμεναι βασιλεύσιν, ἀλλ' ὃ τι εἰσαίτο γελοίοιον Ἀργεῖοισιν ἐμμεναι: αἰσχιστος δὲ ἀνήρ ὑπὸ ἆλιον ἄλθε: φολκὸς ἦν, χωλὸς δ' ἐτερον πόδα: τῷ δὲ οἱ ὑμω κυρτῶ, ἐπὶ στήθος συνοχοκότε: αὐτάρ ύπερθε φοξὸς ἦν κεφαλῆν, μεθυνὶ δ' ἐπενήνοθε λάχνη. ἐχθιστος δ' Ἀχιλῆι μάλιστ' ἦν ἦδ' Ὀδυσσεῖ: ὀξέα κεκληγών λέγ' ὑνείδεα: τῷ δ' ἄρι ᾽Αχαιοι.}\]
And the others were sitting, restrained in their seats, but Thersites alone without measure in his words kept on brawling, he who in his mind knew many disorderly words, in a reckless way and not according to proper arrangement, in order to vie with kings. Moreover, he knew how to speak whatever seemed to be hilarious to the Argives. But he was the ugliest man who came to Ilium: bow-legged, lame of one foot, his two contorted shoulders cramped together upon his chest, while on top, his head was peaked and sparse hair grew thereon. He was also the most hateful to Achilles especially, and to Odysseus. For he kept quarreling with both. Then still against bright Agamemnon he was screaming and heaping insults. And the Achaeans were terribly angry at him and with one common sentiment they felt indignant. But he shouting loudly was rebuking Agamemnon by means of his múthos.

His entrance takes on a dramatic form, and he starts his performance loudly (II. 2.224). The use of μακρά ‘far, long’ with βιβάς and βιβάντα ‘long-striding’ is interesting if one takes Thersites as one who carries his boldness too far. His loud voice and freakish appearance function as markers for his character, as a kind of allegorical mask. In a few lines we have an entire description of the character—outer and inner. He is ugly in an unseemly way (II. 2.216-219), he is inarticulate (II. 2.212-214), mean-spirited (II. 214-215, 222-224), and most importantly he is hated by both Achilles and Odysseus (II. 2.220). The narrative introduction to Thersites then prepares the audience to his speech, in which one might expect all these qualities to become self-evident, but as we shall see they are not quite so. As a dramatic
scene, such description along with the following speeches could provide at least on one level a sort of relief from the main narrative at a critical point, when there still exists the possibility that the Greek warriors might leave the war at Troy. The introduction of Thersites as a grotesque figure at such a critical moment, his speech, and Odysseus’ reply all seem to have facilitated a much needed release from tension. The warriors had been distressed but, by the end of the whole incident, they laugh.

The following is Thersites’ verbal performance, his blame speech and what I treat as the first part of the mise-en-scène (Il. 2.225-242):

**Thersites’ Speech:**

```
"'Αρτείδη, τέο δὴ αύτ' ἐπιμέμφεαι ἢδε χατίζεις;
πλειάδι τοι χαλκοῦ κλισίας. πολλαί δὲ γυναῖκες
εἰσίν ἐνι κλισίης ἔχεστοι. ἃς τοι 'Αχαιοί
πρωτίστω δίδομεν. εὐτ' ὁν πτολεῖθρον ἐλωμεν.
ἡ ἤτι καὶ χρυσοῦ ἐπιδεύεαι. ὃν κε τις οἴσει
Τρώων ἰπποδάμων ἔξ Ἰλίου υίὸς ἀποσα,
ὅν κεν ἐγὼ δῆσας ἀγάγω ἢ ἄλλος 'Αχαίων;
ἣ γυναίκα νέην, ἴνα μίσχεαι ἐν φιλότητι.
ὥς τ' αὐτὸς ἀπονόσαι κατίσχεαι; οὐ μὲν ἐσικέν
ἀρχὸν ἐόντα κακῶν ἐπιβασκέμεν υἱὰς 'Αχαιῶν.
ὡ πέπονες, κάκ' ἐλέγχει, 'Αχαιίδες, οὐκέτ' 'Αχαιοὶ,
οἶκατε. περ ὁν νησί νεώμεθα, τόνδε δ' ἐώμεν
αὐτοῦ ἔνι Τροίη γέρα πεσσέμεν, ὥφα ἤδηται
ἡ β' τι οἱ χήμεις προσαμύνομεν, ἴνα καὶ οὐκί.
ὡς καὶ νῦν 'Αχιλῆ. έο μέγ' ἀμείνονα φώτα.
ἡτίμησεν. ἔλων γὰρ ἔχει γέρας. αὐτός ἀπούρος.
ἄλλα μάλ' οὐκ 'Αχιλῆι χόλος φρεσάν. ἄλλα μεθήμων:
ἡ γὰρ ἁν, 'Αρτείδη, νῦν ἱστατα λωβήσαιον."
```

“Son of Atreus, with what indeed do you again find fault, and what else do you need? Your lodges are full of bronze and many women are in your tents, the choicest ones, whom we the Achaeans give to you first whenever we capture a city.
What more gold do you still want, which some son of Ilium,
of horse-taming Troy, will bring as a ransom
for someone I, or another of the Achaians, might capture?
Or do you need a young woman to join with in
lovemaking
whom you keep away for yourself?3 But it does not seem fitting
for a leader to bring the sons of the Achaians into misery.
Oh, you weaklings, evil wretches, you are Achaean women, no
longer men!
At any rate let us return home with our ships, let us leave him
alone to enjoy his prizes in Troy, so that he may see
whether indeed in some way we are helping him or not,
he who even now has dishonored Achilles, a man much better
than he is.
For he himself having taken and seized Achilles’ prize, still keeps
it.
Yet there is not much anger in Achilles’ heart, but he is remiss.
Isn’t this the case, son of Atreus, that now for the last time you
would commit an outrage?”

In his analysis of Thersites’ speech, Edward Vodoklys argues that
Thersites is finally punished by Odysseus because he fails to use blame
speech formula, that his speech qua blame poetics was incorrectly
expressed.4 Although this analysis accounts for the degree to which blame
poetry is formulaic in the Iliad, it does not account for other factors such as
Thersites’ social position,5 his challenge of a higher authority, his potentially
rebellious speech, his awareness of the various and true implications of the
war for Agamemnon (the king’s pride, greed, lack of sound leadership, and
so on), and his extremely curious physical appearance. In fact, if one were to
bracket off all of these elements, leaving only the stylistic analysis of blame

3. I deviate here from Allen, preferring to read lines 229-233 as rhetorical
questions.
5. Note that Thersites is given considerable space to speak, but he is the only such
character who lacks a patronymic. Even if he is of noble birth, this lack of patronymic
seems to indicate that, at least during his epic moment, he is someone with no name.
speech alone, and Thersites’ violation of its conventions, then one could conceivably come to the conclusion that Thersites deserved ridicule and severe physical punishment in order that the very integrity of the poem *qua* epic formula not be violated.

For Richard Martin, Thersites’ speech cannot be validated because, among other factors, he cannot recall his own deeds of war: “again, style for the hero is a total notion, a proportion of words and deeds.” Martin also draws our attention to the adjective ἄκριτομυθὲς ‘without judgment’, which Odysseus uses to address Thersites in the beginning of his speech in 246. He makes a differentiation between ἄκριτομυθὲς and the other insult words such as ἀμέτροπης ‘without measure’ in verse 212 above. From the root of the adjective *kri-* ‘to judge’, and its negation here, *akri-*, Martin suggests that Thersites is in fact unable to judge his own acts, and his acts are unable to be judged by whatever audience, because the audience “cannot perform the critical judgment necessary to validate his *mûthos*. It remains ‘indeterminate’ or ‘undiscriminated’.” Martin’s conclusion is based on comparison with other passages in which the same root is used to indicate precisely the mental activity required for critical ability. In passages, where one finds the opposite of critical ability, and where *mûthoi* are described as uncritical, “we can see the lack of connection between verbal behavior and martial performance.” In addition, Martin argues: “Thersites slurs his words” because his speech has a high ratio of corruption and synizesis. Again, the analysis of the passage in terms of style and diction is illuminating, but it does not completely explain how the other factors like Thersites’ social

---

8. For lack of connection between words and deeds, see *Il.* 2.796-797.
9. Martin 1989: 112-113. Note the instances of corruption and synizesis in lines 225 (ἐλ ἄτ ἐπιμέμφεσαι ἦδε); 227 (ἐξαίρετοι, ἂς τοι 'Ἄχαιοι); 229 (ἐπιδεσθοί, ὁν); 230 (ἳλιον ὁιο); 232 (μύσγες ἐν); 233 (κατίσχεα; ὁν); 237 (αὐτοῦ ἔνι); 238 (καὶ οὔκι). Martin brings in Stephen Kelly’s work (1974) on rate of corruption for verses of plain narration in the *Iliad*, which are respectively 20 percent and 40 percent. From this Martin concludes that Thersites’ speech “is quite literally ‘without meter’ in his performance.”
position, his insubordinate speech, and so on, coincide with or differ from this construction of Thersites' character derived from his verbal style.\textsuperscript{10}

Perhaps the most significant ambiguity in the passage is the extent to which the narrative level and Thersites' speech are not consonant with each other in their respective constructions of his character. Thersites' speech, however compromised by the narrative introduction to it, is succinct and coherent, and thus it counters the narrative's assertion in 212 and 213 that he is 'unmeasured' (ἀμέτροεπηζ), and that his words are 'disorderly' (ἀκοομά).\textsuperscript{11} Thersites' speech is in fact a fairly elaborate piece of rhetoric divided in two parts. The first is his argument (225-233): that Agamemnon is greedy to the point of risking the warriors' lives. The second part (233-242), which itself has two sections, is his conclusion that the Achaeans should not risk their lives for such a rapacious and careless leader.

In the first part, Thersites substantiates his allegations with concrete examples of Agamemnon's greed, remarking how both the Achaeans and the Trojans are constantly filling his coffers and facilitating his sexual desires (227-233). He develops his arguments with a series of three rhetorical questions (225, 229, 232), to which he provides answers subordinated into his speech (227, 229, 231, 233). In the first section of the second part, Thersites more directly calls on the men to desert and leave Agamemnon (236). He starts by teasing the warriors and calling them women (235), which is doubtless an effective way of stirring them up. However, in the second section (237-238), he indirectly praises the warriors by pointing out that Agamemnon needs them, and here also he is elaborate in his language. Instead of directly telling the warriors that they are important, he uses the opportunity to rebuke Agamemnon further: "he will see whether we are

\textsuperscript{10} Martin 1989:110. To be sure, Martin does point out that there are other factors that contribute to Thersites' "flawed performance," namely his "class, . . . his demagogic tendency to generalize and speak for the entire contingent, while Achilles had spoken for himself alone; and his misrepresentation of the true tradition surrounding Achilles' anger." It seems obvious from Martin's analysis that these other factors only corroborate Thersites' flawed mýthos, but we should note that class, demagoguery, arrogance, and deceit are not necessarily related concepts, that they do not, by necessity, cause lack of verbal dexterity, and indeed neither is physical appearance a prerequisite of a good mýthos. Cf. ll. 3.42-43, where Paris, despite his good looks, elicits blame and laughter

\textsuperscript{11} See nn 5, 7.
helping him or not” 238). Note moreover his use of irony in πέσσεμεν ‘to enjoy’ in 237.

Another significant structural feature in both the first and the second part of Thersites’ speech is his switch between the use of first person plural and singular, on one hand, when he is clearly including himself among the warriors δίδομεν ‘we give’ (228), ἐλωμεν ‘we seize’ (228), νεώμεθα ‘let us return’ (236), ἔωμεν ‘let us leave him alone’ (236), ἡμεῖς προσάμονομεν ‘we defend’ (238), ἔγω . . . ἀγάγω Ι lead’ (231), and the use of second person plural when he is addressing the warriors from the point of view of their self-appointed leader (ὡ πεπονεσ ‘Oh you weaklings’[235]). Finally, in the last four verses, the second section of the second part, Thersites introduces the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles (239-240). His praise of Achilles is a crafty way to reinforce his rebuke of Agamemnon, and cannot be sincere, but it has the added function of echoing the theme of Iliad 1, and therefore of creating a sense of continuum between Books 1 and 2. The diction in Thersites’ passage is fairly uncomplicated, but the complex structure and the quick pace with which he moves from argument to conclusion seem to be neither disorderly nor unmeasured.

Gregory Nagy argues that the reason Thersites’ speech is disorderly is because he misrepresents Achilles’ pathos, by denying that Achilles is angry (241), and, consequently, he misrepresents the very subject of the Iliad. And yet, Thersites’ praise of Achilles is underhanded and his intention seems to reinforce his reproach of Agamemnon. Although the narrative does inform us that Thersites was hateful to Achilles and to Odysseus (221-222), and earlier (214), that he was disposed to quarrel with kings, such messages as the narrative provides seem dubious, and their function is not necessarily to tell the truth but to construct Thersites’ character in a coherent way so that his speech may be anticipated and expected. Perhaps a more stable reading than

---

12. It is interesting to note the occurrence of indirect praise through the medium of blame. This does not seem surprising, considering the importance of alliances and rivalries in the context of a drawn out war. Nevertheless, Thersites’ indirect praise of the fighting men highlights the lack of acknowledgment that the rank and file are a fundamental tool for the war.


14. Compare the Aithiopis, where Achilles finally kills Thersites.
what the narrative offers would take into consideration that it is unlikely for Thersites to be unaware of the possible consequences, at least for himself, of his misrepresentation of Achilles’ anger. He has already been shown to be capable of rationally considering what both his and the warriors’ best interest might be, and he also seems conscious of the politics of war (225-233). Therefore his motivation for so blatantly misrepresenting Achilles’ disposition is precisely that—a motivation, rather than the result of a thoughtless tirade as the narrative tells it.\(^\text{15}\)

The fact that behind Thersites’ motivation there may be a desire simply to instigate strife among the Greek chiefs does not alter the potentially subversive content of his speech, yet this plausible desire is what Vodoklys calls “non corrective in intent” because “[Thersites’] language is serious but he is intent on arousing τὸ γελοίον ‘the hilarious, the laughable thing, the ridiculous’. But again contrary to the narrative’s characterization Thersites arouses anger (220, 222-223), not laughter in everyone probably because his mūthos cannot be as readily dismissed as the narrative would have us believe. Indeed given that a few verses earlier the warriors were so eager to sail back home, one could expect that at least some of the warriors would agree with Thersites’ message, even if they despised the messenger. In fact, it is not until Odysseus confirms the unacceptability of challenging authority by punishing Thersites that the warriors respond by engaging in laughter and jests (272-277).

Thersites’ grotesque character might be on one level parallel to a representation of the epic view of the multitude as a thoughtless herd, but considering that the Greek chieftains depended on this same multitude for their very own personal glory—a point raised by Thersites (238)—it is essential from the epic point of view to dissociate Thersites’ arguments from the rest of the multitude. Since this dissociation was not neatly done by Thersites’ social position alone,\(^\text{16}\) it was effected by turning him into a freak and providing him with Odysseus as a kind of a circus animal trainer.

\(^{15}\) Kirk 1985:140. I agree with Kirk’s assertion that “Thersites ingeniously (my italics) drags in the quarrel over Briseis.”

\(^{16}\) Although Thersites’ social position is an essential component of his role as the poor-man’s anti-hero, it does not of course suffice in and of itself to discredit his speech. The very fact that Odysseus minds to engage with him should make this apparent.
Still, despite such portrayal, Thersites is given a well-reasoned speech, albeit one that transgresses stylistic convention. It is the internal clash between the pull to discredit Thersites versus Thersites’ own words that makes his speech more poignant, his character more liminal, and the epic stance on the matter equivocal and richer.

The argument that Thersites violates the norms of blame expression and that he does not have a good record of deeds to back his speech are important for my own argument, which is that the character of Thersites represents dissent and rebellion on a social level, and this dissent is magnified into a caricature of both his verbal style and his physical appearance. Nevertheless, as we have seen in Thersites’ speech, the caricature of his verbal style is not as successful as the caricature of his physique, so that the disparity between the narrative and the mise-en-scène becomes clearer. Ultimately Thersites’ violation of formulaic modes of expression and his lack of heroic standard can be seen as a linguistic metaphor for the Homeric construction of rebellion, and whatever inconsistencies in such representation could in turn be seen as a reflection of a possible historical transition in traditional values by the time Thersites makes his way into the epic.

Similarly, the type of blame expression Odysseus uses, culminating in physical punishment, can be read as a representation of the Homeric view on the appropriate manner in which to manage rebellion, but one should also note that Odysseus’ speech, just as with his character itself, has some unconventional elements from the point of view of epic poetic tradition, and in this sense Odysseus too can be said to violate accepted norms and conventions of blame speech, though he is not punished. After Thersites’ speech Odysseus enters the scene announced by a vivid introduction, and accordingly he assumes a dramatic posture before his speech (II. 2.243-245):

"Ος φάτο νεικείων Ἄγαμέμνονα ποιμένα λαῶν,
Θερσίτης: τῷ δ' ὄκα παριστάτο δίος Ὅδυσσεύς,
καὶ μιν ὑπόθρα ἴδων χαλεπῶ ἀνίπτατε μῦθῳ.

17. Martin 1989:112-113n55. On the stylistic level and still on the matter of correpntion and synizesis, Martin states that "it may be that such slurring indicates another genre of speech; vowel elision, prefixation, and other linguistic markers can function this way."
Thus Thersites spoke, insulting Agamemnon, the shepherd of the people.
But again right away stood brilliant Odysseus
and looking at him from under his brow he scolded him with a harsh *múthos*.

**Odysseus’ Speech (II. 2.245-263):**

“Θερσίτ’ ἀκριτόμυθε, λιγύς περ ἔων ἀγορητής,
ἴσχεσ, μὴ δ’ ἐθελ’ οἰος ἐριζέμεναι βασιλεύσιν·
οὐ γὰρ ἐγὼ σέο φημὶ χερείστερον βροτόν ἄλλον
ἐμεναι, ὅσοι ἄμ’ Ἀτρέιδης ὑπὸ Ἰλιον ἠλθον.
τῷ οὐκ ἄν βασιλῆς ἀνὰ στόμ’ ἔχων ἀγορεύσις,
καὶ σφιν ονείδεα τε προφέροις νόστον τε φυλάσσοις.
οὐδὲ τί πω σάφα ἰδιεν ὅπως ἔσται τάδε ἔργα,
ἡ εὖ ἄκακως νοστήσομεν ὑμεῖς Ἀχαίων.
τῷ νῦν Ἀτρέιδη Ἀγαμέμνονι, ποιῳνεν λαῶν,
ὁσαι ονείδεων, ὅτι οἱ μᾶλα πολλὰ διδοῦσιν
ήρως Δαναοί; σὺ δὲ κερτομένων ἀγορεύεις;
ἄλλ’ ἐκ τοι ἐρέω, τὸ δὲ καὶ τετελεσμένον ἔσται·
εἰ κ’ ἐτι σ’, ἀφραινοντα κιχήσομαι ὡς νῦ περ ὅδε,
μηκέτ’ ἐπεῖτ’ Ὀδυσσῆι κάρη ὤμοισιν ἐπείδη,
μὴ δ’ ἐτι Τηλεμάχοιο πατὴρ κεκλημένος εἰην,
eἰ μὴ ἐγὼ σε λαβῶν ἀπὸ μὲν φίλα εἴματα δύσω,
χλαίναν τ’ ἢ δεῖ χιτῶνα, τά τ’ αἰδώ ἀμφικαλύπτει
αὐτὸν δὲ κλαίνοντα θοᾶς ἐπι νῆς ἀφήσω
πεπλήγων ἀγορηθὲν ἀκείσοι πληγῆσιν.”

“Thersites, you of indiscriminate speech, though you are a clear-
sounding speaker,
hold back and do not wish to be the sort to fight with kings.
For I say that there is no other worse than you are,
of all that came to Ilium with the son of Atreus.
Therefore you should not hold your mouth up to speak
with kings, you had better not heap insults on them
and watch for a chance to return home.
In no way at all do we clearly know how these deeds will be, whether well or badly will we sons of the Achaeans journey home. Therefore now against Agamemnon, son of Atreus, shepherd of the people do you sit there throwing abuses, saying that to him the Danaan heroes give many things? And do you keep on tormenting him and speaking?\(^{18}\) But I will say to you, and even this thing will be accomplished: if again I find you playing the fool just as you are even now, no longer then shall the head of Odysseus be on his shoulders nor yet will I be called Telemachus’ father if I do not, taking you, strip off your clothing and your cloak and your chiton which covers your genitals and you yourself, I will send you off wailing to the swift ships beaten from the assembly with unseemly blows.”

As Kirk has noted, Odysseus’ blame speech in response to Thersites “derives its force from its content and elaborate syntax rather than from any apparent urgency in the delivery.”\(^{19}\) Odysseus’ speech is filled with apocalyptic threats, and it also becomes an opportunity for him to reassert his position in the social fabric of the epic by invoking his son, and thereby establishing a lineage, which Thersites so obviously lacks. But note that he identifies himself in terms of his descendant and not his ancestral lineage, a fact that perhaps reinforces his status as the man of tomorrow who depends fully on what he is able to accomplish and on his ability as a speaker, rather than simply deriving his strength from a noble origin. Odysseus’ words and behavior also shed light on the liminal position he occupies insofar as his status as a hero is concerned. Since Agamemnon is silent in the face of Thersites’ invective, Odysseus becomes the king’s self-appointed defender—a neat parallel to Thersites as spokesperson for the warriors—and as such not only is the hierarchical gap between Odysseus and Agamemnon

---

\(^{18}\) I deviate here from Allen, preferring to read verses 254-256 as rhetorical questions.  
\(^{19}\) Kirk 1985:143.
made clear, but also the difference in character between the two figures, Odysseus being the one with the more appropriate moral disposition to quarrel with the rank and file. Indeed, Odysseus seems to be the perfect middleman, mediating between the multitude and Agamemnon. He is able to speak the language of the multitude: he has, as it were, street-wisdom, and he is beloved for it. In fact, the part of the interaction between the two characters that pleased the warriors the most was Odysseus’ physical punishment of Thersites. The addition of some spectacle helped relax the warriors, and it is clear that they will no longer abandon the war (II. 2.265-270):

"Ως ἀρ’ ἐφη, σκῆπτρῳ δὲ μετάφρενον ἤδε καὶ ὡς πληξεν ὁ δ’ ἱδνωθη, βαλερόν δὲ οἱ ἐκπεσε δάκρυ· σμῶδις δ’ αἰματόσσα μεταφρένου ἔχωςεν ὁ σκῆπτρον ὕπο χρυσεύ· ὁ δ’ ἀρ’ ἐζετο τάρβησεν τε, ἀλγήσας δ’ ἄχρειον ἵδων ἀπομόρφας το δάκρυ. οἱ δὲ καὶ ἄχνυμενοι περ ἐπ’ αὐτῷ ἢδ’ γέλασαν.

Thus then he spoke and with his scepter he struck his back
and shoulders and he was bent down and a warm tear escaped
him.
And a bloody weal raised from his back
from the golden scepter. And he then sat down and was terrified
and grieving and looking helpless he wiped off his tear.
But the others, though they were distressed laughed heartily at
him.

Odysseus then manages to restore order, but, ironically, this is
accomplished with the inadvertent cooperation of Thersites, whose rebellion
turns out to function as a catalyst for the renewal of order. Thersites’
accidental corroboration toward this renewal of order comes not only from
the spectacle of his beating, but from the kind of antagonism he elicits in all.
According to my argument this antagonism must be explained not only by
what the narrative tells us about him, but, more importantly, by what it does
not, namely the way in which Thersites positions himself ambivalently
against authority (Odysseus/Agamemnon). He aligns himself with the
warriors, but at the same time he elevates himself above them by playing the
role of their self-appointed leader. In addition he plays the role of the common man, but, as some commentators have noted, his arguments reflect those of Achilles. His daring to call on desertion could be seen as terribly audacious, if not courageous, yet he quickly becomes meek once Odysseus strikes the scepter against him. Moreover, judging from Odysseus’ own acknowledgment of his speech and given the actual space granted for his mûthos, one might credit Thersites’ desire to compete with heroes in words, since, as Martin has pointed out, he cannot measure up to any in deeds.  

It is the combination of Thersites’ position as an outsider, but an outsider manqué, and Odysseus’ liminal position as a neoteric hero that engenders the quick inversion from chaos (147-159) to order (270-276). To put it differently, there is a momentary inversion of the status quo, when the voice of dissent is given a brief, but substantial, space to be expressed, only to be cast in the most negative light, that is, as the product of a lonely and freakish mind. Thersites is in fact the only one who stood up to speak, and Odysseus’ rebuke further isolated him, so that dissent quickly changed from the mass movement of the warriors to an isolated incident. Such a social dimension in this passage does not neatly depict the dichotomy “ruler vs. subordinate” between Thersites and Odysseus, but, more significantly, it reveals the social function and representation of the multitude, of what is popular in the epic, and these elements should be brought to bear on the analysis of blame poetry as used by these two characters, especially when one considers them as two different versions of the same nonaristocratic world. Thersites is the obvious example of this popular role, but, with Odysseus, this other world becomes clearer through his position vis-à-vis Agamemnon and his ability to get down and dirty with the fighting men. Such a social dimension then reveals the unstable position of both characters, a factor that would be harder to discern through stylistic and linguistic analysis alone.

Thersites’ main problem is that he does not fit in any way the heroic ideology of the epic world he inhabits. Even his rebellion is at variance with the heroic ideology of dissent (compare the way in which Achilles is also a rebel). His speech also falls outside the proper heroic mode of expression, as does his ancestry, or lack thereof, and, of course, his physical appearance. Thersites is stripped of any credibility before he even speaks, and this is why

---

20. Note Thersites’ claim of what he has done in verse 231 of his speech.
it is remarkable that his speech should contain the degree of truth it does in the face of his characterization. By the same token, Odysseus’ main problem is to gain credibility at every step of the way, and this is why he must get involved with the kind of man Agamemnon would not, and why he must not only consider the morale of the warriors, but also speak their language and be liked by them. The confluence of such elements drives both characters to perform the inversion from chaos to order, and ultimately to reinforce the status quo, so that both outsider and middleman are incorporated into the social order.\footnote{Lincoln 1989:142-143 presents an illuminating study on discourse and society. In Chapter 9, titled “The Dialectics of Symbolic Inversion,” he analyzes the phenomenon of symbolic inversion as a tool for the dominant culture to reinforce its own ideology concerning power. One of the examples he uses comes from Livy 2.32.9-11. This is the account of the first secession by the Roman plebs (c. 494 BCE) and the “Apologue of Menenius Agrippa.” According to Livy, Menenius Agrippa, a man of plebeian origin, who had risen in rank and thus was the perfect intermediary sort of man, managed to persuade the plebs to abandon their secession by means of a story, which Lincoln goes on to analyze as a successful symbolic inversion for the benefit of the patricians. Menenius Agrippa created an analogy based on the relationship between the patricians and the people, where the people were equated with the parts of the body, and the patricians with the belly. This was his first inversion, since in the traditional discourse the patricians were always identified as the head. Menenius then gained the sympathy of the plebs who thought that the patricians were indeed this insatiable belly for whom the rest of the body had to work. Once this inversion was established, Menenius proceeded once again to invert the symbols, so that now the belly gained prominence over the rest of the body, because, according to his story, the parts of the body that revolted against the belly had in the end wasted away, and therefore it was clear that without the belly, the rest of the body could not live. The relevance of Lincoln’s study for this essay is of course the importance of discourse in the manipulation of power, and such discourse might be the most effective if brought out by someone in such an intermediary position as Menenius and likewise Odysseus. See also Lincoln’s study of professional wrestling and the importance of symbolic discourse there. Lincoln shows how, among other things, the “heroes” of wrestling invariably must have a manager who is articulate in his speeches.}

Looking at Aristotle’s formulation of blame poetry, Nagy restates it this way: “blame poetry has a potential for the comic element . . . But blame poetry itself is more inclusive and thus cannot be equated with comedy.”\footnote{Nagy 1979:256. Furthermore, Nagy observes that this potentially comic aspect of blame poetry does not make the Epos comical, but rather, it ridicules the one engaging in blame expression—in this case, Thersites, and I add Odysseus.}
This wider inclusiveness of blame poetry underscores the ambiguity of the passage, so that it is possible to doubt whether the epic's intention is simply to ridicule Thersites. The passage seems to be too self-referential and emphatic for that, especially when one considers that its absence would prove no crucial loss to the plot or to character development. In fact, if Thersites' speech and the following response from Odysseus were to be removed, there would be a rather smooth transition between ll. 2.210 and the second half of verse 282, that is, between the chronologically natural order of events from the time when the warriors reassemble to Odysseus' address to them. After all, the *Iliad* is not about Thersites or anti-heroes. Thersites' character is intriguing because, among other things, it is developed in such a brief time frame only to be dropped forever.

Nevertheless, as it has been observed, blame poetry has the potential for the comic element, and, according to Aristotle's formulation of comedy, this mode of expression pertains to the world of the base, because laughter belongs to the universe of baseness, and therefore in blame poetry, the one engaging in blame must also be base. It follows, then, from such a formulation that Odysseus must be base, despite his relatively superior social status, because he engages not only in blame poetry but also in physical violence. Indeed, if Thersites is ridiculed, so must Odysseus be and also the soldiers—Odysseus for engaging in base behavior, and the warriors for

---

23. To be sure, Achilles is a special kind of an anti-hero.
24. Nagy 1979:257. Nagy points out, however, that some passages in the *Iliad* do not conform to this Aristotelian formulation.
25. Ste. Croix 1981:413 writes that "the aristocratic society for which the Homeric poems were composed would have regarded Odysseus' brutal treatment of Thersites as perfectly right and proper, and characteristic of a great man." While I believe that Ste. Croix's class analysis of Thersites and Odysseus is important, it suffers from the lack of a literary and anthropological dimension, from which one could infer that the aristocracy would probably have laughed, just as the warriors did, and that in this the lines may not have been so rigidly discerned as to present a fundamental distinction between what is comical for the noble and for the average man. Recalling Bakhtin, it is important to remember that according to him, the division between the ridiculous and the sublime as correlatives of the "lower" and the "upper" class was not characteristic of the archaic period, nor of the classical period. Rather, it was a product of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, one must reconcile Aristotle's formulation, that the ridiculous equals the base, and the idea that laughter is the stuff of the world of baseness, and therefore it would seem that the concept itself was not a product of the Middle Ages, but rather it might have been merely formalized during this period.
enjoying the circus. In fact, immediately following Odysseus’ punishment of Thersites, the warriors begin to banter with one another, confirming thereby not only that their very recent attempt to desert Agamemnon is forgotten, but, more importantly, they confirm Odysseus’ authority (II. 2.271-278):

"ώδε δὲ τις εἶπεσεν ἵδων ἐς πλησίον ἄλλων:
"ὦ πότοι, ἢ δὴ μυρί' Ὄδυσσεὺς ἐσθλὰ ἔργε
βουλάς τ' ἔξάρχων ἀγαθὰς πόλεμον τε κορύσσων;
νῦν δὲ τὸδε μέγ' ὁριστον ἐν Ἀργείωισιν ἔρεξεν,
ὅς τὸν λνβητήρα ἐπεσβόλον ἐσχ' ἀγοράων.
οὗ δὲν μιν πάλιν αὐτις ἀνήσει θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ
νεικείειν βασιλῆς ὀνειδεύς ἔπέσσαιν."

And each looking at his neighbor was speaking thus:

Oh my, Odysseus has already accomplished a myriad of noble things,
bringing in good counsels and arming for the war.
But now this is by far the best he has done,
who, speaking in the assembly held back this word-flinging slanderer.
Not indeed again will his manly courage spur him to insult kings with offensive words.

The warriors’ talk could thus form a third speech within the narrative, but the function of their side-discussion in the verses above comes closer to a comic chorus voicing their delight in raillery than it does to a speech proper for it to be considered a third part of the mise-en-scène. This is why their role seems more properly defined as the audience for the mise-en-scène, but it is also possible to see them as the substitute audience for the epic poem itself. If one considers the first alternative (the warriors as the audience of the mise-en-scène), their portrayal is clearly negative, and they appear as an easily goaded flock of sheep. This portrayal would justify their need of a leader, and the implication of Thersites asking them to abandon Agamemnon is extremely dangerous. In this case, the Homeric view of the multitude seems to acknowledge that their misperception of reality is both advantageous and dangerous. Ironically, though, by presenting the multitude in this light,
Odysseus’ *mùthos* becomes by default less impressive than it might be in its contrast to that of Thersites. In the second alternative (the warriors as the poem’s audience), the narrative would seem to be conscious of the real audience’s level of engagement in the story being told. The *epos* is presenting the audience with the tension of possible subversion of order (relying on the audience’s suspension of disbelief), but in the end order is restored and the audience can laugh, before the real battle begins.

It appears, then, that the ambiguities I have pointed out in this passage would come not only from its structure alone, divided into these two levels (narrative and speeches) in tension with one another, but also from the unmistakably unstable position of the two characters involved. There is no doubt that a dichotomy is being set up between Odysseus and Thersites along the lines of good and evil, hero and non-hero, effective *mùthos* and non-effective *mùthos*, but, as I hope to have shown, the opposition of Thersites and Odysseus is undermined by other factors that destabilize this otherwise neat distinction. Consider for example the narrative description of both Thersites and his verbal skills before we hear his own speech—a description that directs, even instructs, the audience about how to receive Thersites’ *mùthos*. Consider as well the inconsistency between the narrative description of his speech-making ability and his actual speech—the most flagrant being the fact that he provokes anger rather than laughter. Note Odysseus’ liminal position—above the warriors as their leader, but below kings. Note also Thersites and Odysseus as two different roles of the same performance and, ultimately, but almost by default, advancing the same cause. Think of the restoration of order and of the status quo through chaos, and especially consider the possible historical transition in heroic ideology whereby an important space is created for someone like Odysseus, whom one could call a hustler. Finally, although outside the scope of this essay proper, it is interesting to remember that Book 2 opens with a dream carrying a deceitful message, the purpose of which was to cause much destruction to the Greek host, so that the withdrawal of Achilles—the other sort of rebel—might be deeply felt, and Agamemnon might regret his insult against the epic hero. Although order was achieved through the momentary chaos engendered by Thersites and Odysseus, chaos once again is to come to the Greek host in battle.