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### Phoenix, Achilles and a Narrative Pattern

In transmitted Greek literature, the legend of Meleager and the Calydonian boar is first told as a part of one of the great speeches in Book 9 of the *Iliad*.<sup>1</sup> This book has always been considered one of the most marvellous passages in the poem. Here Agamemnon recognizes his fault in having offended Achilles, and envoys are sent to the angry hero, entrusted with the mission of offering him rich gifts and persuading him to return to battle. Achilles remains stubborn, but during the argumentation heroic standards and values are laid open to scrutiny in a highly dramatic and emotional fashion. It is one of the Homeric passages that Plato discussed.<sup>2</sup> Cedric Whitman made this scene the centre of the ring composition he found in the *Iliad*.<sup>3</sup> Adam Parry analysed Achilles' language, maintaining that his very questioning of traditional heroic morals was a breach with formulaic diction, a viewpoint that led to a long and subtle discussion of the scope and potentialities of traditional language.<sup>4</sup> And the scene is at the heart of the Homeric study by the great Swedish novelist Sven Delblanc, written when he was dying from cancer, in which he forcefully argued that when Achilles says that he will leave the war and return to his home, even if this means losing his claim to heroic fame, he is profoundly serious: when death is threatening, a long, uneventful life seems much more attractive than any kind of heroic valour.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some of it is also told in Hesiod, *Ehoëae* fr. 25 (Merkelbach & West), vv. 9-17.

<sup>2</sup> *Hippias Minor*, esp. 364e-365d and 369a-371e.

<sup>3</sup> Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Adam Parry, "The language of Achilles", *TAPA* 87, 1-7. A summary of the discussion, with references, is to be found in G. S. Kirk, ed., *The Iliad: A Commentary* (1993), vol. 3, by Bryan Hainsworth (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101-102.

<sup>5</sup> Sven Delblanc, *Homerisk hemkomst. Två essäer om Iliaden och Odysseen* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1992), esp. 45-65.

Book 9 has also been a bone of contention in the old battle between analysts and unitarians, with a question of verbal forms as its focal point: Nestor dispatches the embassy using dual verbs, even though three heroes are sent along, Odysseus, Ajax and Phoenix. For instance, D. L. Page's argumentation that Phoenix is a newcomer in the book, added as one of the latest layers of the text, still makes enjoyable reading.<sup>6</sup> And one of the founding fathers of neo-analysis, J. Th. Kakridis, opened up new perspectives with his interpretation of the way Meleager's story is used by Phoenix in his speech.<sup>7</sup>

In the following I shall argue that an important aspect of Phoenix' words has nevertheless been overlooked. Scholars have mostly taken the side of the envoys. For instance, in the authoritative modern commentary by Bryan Hainsworth Achilles is said to be unreceptive because of overwhelming self-pity.<sup>8</sup> But I think that the text invites us to share our sympathies between the characters, since Achilles has much better reasons for declining the embassy than usually accepted.

When the envoys arrive, Achilles underlines that the three of them are his best friends among the Achaeans (198, 204), and later on Phoenix repeats this (521-2). The whole of the latter's long speech (434-605) exploits the fact that they are related by bonds of close friendship, and that between himself and Achilles the relationship is even that of a father to his son. In the beginning he twice addresses him as *philon tekos*, my dear child, and he gives a touching description of how when Achilles was a baby, he used to hold him on his knee and accepted having his clothes soiled at meals. Phoenix concludes the first part of his speech, the tale of his own life, with the statement that since he knew that he would never have sons of his own, he gave Achilles this place in his world.

Also, it is noticeable that the relationship between parents and children is the dominant theme of the speech: not only are the two main stories, of Phoenix himself and of Meleager, both concerned with this relationship, but it also comes up in other passages. Phoenix opens his speech by reminding Achilles of his father Peleus and the commands he gave him at their departure. In Phoenix' autobiography, when Peleus receives him kindly, it is

<sup>6</sup> D. L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959, *Sather Classical Lectures* 31), esp. 297-315. For a qualified answer to Page's arguments, see Michael N. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition. A Study in the Oral Art of Homer*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California University Press, 1974), 64-111, esp. n. 35 on p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> J. Th. Kakridis, *Homeric Researches* (1944; *Skrifter utgivna av Kungliga Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet i Lund* 45, 1949), 11-42.

<sup>8</sup> Kirk, *The Iliad*, 119.

said that he loved him as a father, though Peleus, of course, was in no need of a son. And when it comes to Meleager's wife Cleopatra, both her parents and her mother's parents are brought into the tale in a brief and enigmatic digression, that seems of no relevance to the story told, except that it directs the attention to how parents and children relate to one another. So in this speech we find the following parent-child relations: Phoenix – Achilles, Peleus – Achilles, Amyntor and his wife – Phoenix, Peleus – Phoenix, Oeneus and Althaea – Meleager, Idas and Marpessa – Cleopatra, and Marpessa's parents – Marpessa.

These last-mentioned parents were known as unhappy because their daughter was carried off by Apollo. But what is really disturbing in the speech is the way in which the main characters, Phoenix and Meleager, are treated by their parents. Both tales are about parents who curse their sons: Phoenix' father makes his son childless, whereas Meleager's mother even calls forth her son's death. So for all the warmth and emotion of Phoenix' speech, there runs just under the surface an opposite story of parents hating their sons and ruining their lives. And there is even an explicitly egoistic element in Phoenix' appeal: in the same breath as he reminds Achilles that he considers him as his son, he also says that he therefore expects him to save his life (494-5).

There is in the *Iliad* a narrative pattern that is of relevance here. When a hero prepares himself to join battle, his closest relatives may try to keep him back in order to save his life. As with other Homeric patterns, it may occur in more or less detail. In its briefest form, it is just barely mentioned, such as in 11.225-6 and 329-32: a foster-father tries to retain a young warrior and even arranges for him to marry his daughter so as to keep him at home, and a prophet foresees the death of his sons and will not allow them to participate in the war. At full scale, the most developed example is Andromache's attempt at convincing Hector not to return to the battlefield in Book 6 (vv. 369-502). But also towards the end of the *Iliad* the pattern recurs in highly moving ways: when from the top of the walls of Troy Priam and Hecuba argue with Hector that he should seek refuge inside the gates rather than take up battle with Achilles (22.25-92); and when later Hecuba scolds her old husband and suggests that he has grown senile, all in order to make him give up his dangerous plan of going into the enemy's camp to fetch his son's corpse (24.191-227).

I read this pattern as one of the ways in which the poet reveals the love between the involved parties. They may express themselves directly, as does Andromache, but deeds are more convincing than words, and even when the words are insulting, as are Hecuba's in Book 24, we are left in no doubt about her love for Priam, revealed in her very fear of the terrible risk he is facing. If we compare with the following scene between Helen and

Paris in Book 6 (vv. 313-68), the significance of the pattern becomes even clearer: Hector has come to persuade his brother to join his comrades on the battlefield, and Helen finds it absolutely shameful that he is staying safely at home while Greeks and Trojans are killing each other for his and her sake. The implicit message is that she does not care all that much whether he survives or not.

If we return to Phoenix' speech with this pattern in mind, his appeal to Achilles becomes ambiguous. He knows well enough that Achilles risks his life if he goes back into battle, since he has just heard from Achilles himself of the warning Thetis once gave her son (410-16). By wanting him to join the battle in spite of this, he reveals his lack of true love for the young hero.

That this is actually how he is understood by Achilles also emerges from the answer he is given (607-19). The rare word *atta* with which Achilles addresses him conveys affectionate regard, according to Hainsworth.<sup>9</sup> It is found once more in the *Iliad*, in another address to Phoenix (17.561, Menelaus speaking), and six times in the *Odyssey* (16.31, 57, 130, 17.6, 599, 21.369), where in all cases Telemachus is speaking to the swineherd Eumaios. Besides the affection, I also hear a condescending tone in these addresses. It is clearest in 21.369 of the *Odyssey*, where Telemachus is actually irritated with the swineherd; but in general, it seems to be an approach to a person who is old and close, but of lower standing than the speaker. Achilles' speech is certainly affectionate and respectful, but strikingly brief compared to Phoenix' loquacity. The only part of the foster-father's argumentation to which Achilles gives an answer is the final appeal that he should accept the honourable gifts that he is offered now, since later he will have to fight anyway, but then without gifts. This is dismissed: Achilles feels in no need of this kind of honour. The rest of his answer boils down to: Old man, you ought to love me rather than my enemies.

For all his references to paternal love, Phoenix is primarily concerned with his own life and the safety of the Greek army. His speech makes the tragedy of Achilles stand out in shocking clarity: Not only will his life be short, but his closest kinsman gives priority to his duties as a warrior rather than to his survival.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>10</sup> I thank John D. Kendal for revising my English.