

AGAMEMNON BEST OF SPEARMEN

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THE FINAL SCENE of the funeral games for Patroklos in *Iliad* 23 is generally considered one of the poem's less controversial episodes. Two heroes, Agamemnon and Meriones, present themselves for the spear-throwing competition, but before the competition has even begun Achilles intervenes and offers as prize to Agamemnon "an unfired cauldron with patterns / of flowers on it, the worth of an ox" (23.885-886), and to Meriones "a far-shadowing spear" (23.885).¹ The spear-throwing is the only competition in which prizes are awarded without a contest taking place, although Nestor is generously awarded a two-handed jar by Achilles despite being prevented by age from taking an active part in the games (23.616-623). Similar generosity is normally attributed to Achilles' words as he proposes the allocation of prizes to Agamemnon and Meriones:

"Son of Atreus, for we know how much you surpass all others,
by how much you are greatest for strength among the spear-throwers,
therefore take the prize and keep it and go back to your hollow
ships; but let us give the spear to the hero Meriones;
if your own heart would have it this way, for so I invite you."

23.890-894

A sample of recent comments reveals a rare unanimity: "[Achilleus] acknowledges that his power cannot be a substitute for Agamemnon's authority";² "the spirit of group harmony reaches its climax . . . where Achilles honors both Agamemnon's standing as a warrior and his position as chief";³ "Achilles shows by example what it means to give due honour to one's fellow-heroes . . . this magnanimous act forms a fitting climax to the games and is in consonance with the spirit of goodwill with which Achilles has presided over the games";⁴ "[Achilleus] awards the king a gratuitous prize. This is aristocratic society in order, where magnanimity and *noblesse oblige* operate as they should, and men's true abilities appear."⁵ Griffin⁶ considers it a "chivalrous gesture," Schein⁷ that he awards it "in a courtly and

¹Translations are taken from R. Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago 1951).

²S. Benardete, "Achilles and the *Iliad*," *Hermes* 91 (1963) 1-16, at 16.

³W. Donlan, "The Structure of Authority in the *Iliad*," *Arethusa* 12 (1979) 51-70, at 63.

⁴J. R. Dunkle, "Some Notes on the Funeral Games: *Iliad* 23," *Prometheus* 7 (1981) 11-18, at 17.

⁵C. H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass. 1958) 263.

⁶J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford 1980) 71.

⁷S. L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero* (Berkeley 1984) 156.

considerate fashion, so as to avoid disappointment or difficulty," this latter hinting at the likely repetition of Agamemnon's peevish reaction at 1.133 to the suggestion that he alone should be without a prize.

One of the fullest interpretations of the passage is that of Atchity:⁸ "The king comes forward to try his hand against the others, but Achilles, respectfully, will not allow him to compete. He explains that he has two reasons for his hesitation (23.885-897): the king is superior, by his position, to the others and should not compete with them as if he were among peers. And Achilles has no right to judge Agamemnon in such a contest; the king's power is inherited, and cannot be weighed by temporary or individualistic standards. Instead Achilles praises Agamemnon for his humility and valor and courteously offers him a prize. The happy new bond between the two primary individuals is marked by the fact that neither participates in the games. Achilles refrains from the engagement because of his *de facto* jurisdiction and superiority, Agamemnon since he is detached *ex officio*." Much of this is founded upon surmise: Achilleus himself says he will not take part because he would be sure to win first prize and because of his grief for Patroklos (23.272-286); Agamemnon, on the other hand, says nothing, but a more likely explanation of his non-participation suggests itself—he is offered a prize and, true to form, he readily accepts something for nothing, very much as he was accused of doing by Achilleus at 1.225-230. Whether such terms as "magnanimity," "respect," and "the happy new bond" are appropriate to Achilleus' words will be the subject of this paper. By way of preface however, it should be noted that there is nothing in his speech to indicate that Achilleus praises Agamemnon for his humility or his valour, or that he acknowledges that Agamemnon's power is inherited and cannot be weighed by temporary or individualistic standards. What Achilleus actually says is

'Ατρείδη. ἴδμεν γάρ, ὅσον προβέβηκας ἀπάντων
ἡδ' ὅσον δυνάμει τε καὶ ἡμασιν ἔπλεν ἄριστος 23.890-891

In his commentary on *Iliad* 24, a commentary which established new standards of understanding and sensitivity, C. W. Macleod had an uncharacteristic lapse in discussing these lines: "The book [23] ends with Achilles recognizing what he had so fiercely questioned in book 1, that Agamemnon is 'best in power and years' (891); and if in book 1 he attacked the king as a poor fighter (225-8), here he graciously exempts him from the competition altogether."⁹ Here too there is emphasis upon Achilleus' new spirit of goodwill towards his former adversary; yet here too there is a misrepresentation of what Achilleus is actually saying. Macleod's comment is clearly based

⁸K. J. Atchity, *Homer's Iliad: The Shield of Memory* (Carbondale, Ill. 1978) 224-225.

⁹C. W. Macleod, *Homer's Iliad Book 24* (Cambridge 1982) 31.

upon an incorrect translation of 23.891: ἡμασιν is the dative plural, not of ἡμαρ "day," but of ἡμα, an Homeric hapax meaning "throwing." Achilles therefore is acknowledging that Agamemnon is "best in power and throwing" not "best in power and years." But what does "best in power" mean, and is this itself a correct translation of δυνάμει ἄριστος? The phrase does not recur in the poem, and δύναμις is employed on only four occasions: at 8.294 Teukros declares his willingness for battle "so far as the δύναμις is in me"; at 13.786-787 Paris tells Hektor that he will follow him in battle "in so far as the δύναμις stays with us. / But beyond his δύναμις no man can fight, although he be eager"; and at 22.20 Achilles tells Apollo that he would punish him for saving the Trojans "if only the δύναμις were in me." In each case the word is to be translated "physical strength" or "stamina." Similarly of the six uses of δύναμις in the *Odyssey* five (2.62; 3.205; 20.237; 21.202; 23.128) indicate physical strength, and only at 10.69, when Odysseus appeals to the Aeolians, is there the sense "power": "make good our error, my friends, for yours is the δύναμις." The *Odyssey* in fact provides the closest parallel to the phrase under consideration: at 20.237 Eumaios declares that if Zeus would bring about Odysseus' return, γνώης χ' οἷα ἐμὴ δύναμις καὶ χεῖρες ἔπονται (= 21.202). It seems likely therefore that Achilles is acknowledging not Agamemnon's political power, but rather his physical strength, and that the phrase δυνάμει τε καὶ ἡμασιν ἄριστος is to be translated "best in strength and throwing": that is, Achilles praises his rival as the best spear-thrower, which is hardly a surprising acknowledgment in view of his insistence that Agamemnon need not compete at all.

What then of the first line (890) of Achilles' declaration: ἴδμεν γάρ ὅσον προβέβηκας ἀπάντων? In the sense of "stride out in front of" προβέβηκας is found at 6.125 when Diomedes challenges Glaukos who has appeared before him: πολλὸν προβέβηκας ἀπάντων σφ' θάρσει; in addition, however, it is possible that the dative θάρσει may suggest the further meaning of προβέβηκας, "to excel, surpass." It is certainly in this latter sense that Achilles uses the word at 16.54: complaining to Patroklos about Agamemnon's treatment of him, he says that "this thought comes as a bitter sorrow to my heart and my spirit / when a man tries to foul one who is his equal, to take back / a prize of honour, because he goes in greater authority," ὃ τε κράτει προβέβηκε, because, that is, he excels in authority. In this case the dative indicates in what respect Agamemnon excels; in the previous example the dative, although primarily causal, may also convey a measure of respect—Glaukos strides out in front by reason of his courage, and he excels in respect of his courage. The only other example in the poem of προβέβηκας is the one under consideration, 23.890: Achilles declares that Agamemnon excels, but does not indicate in what respect he believes he does so. From where then have commentators deduced that Achilles means that he excels in political power? Presumably from the use of δυνάμει in the following line;

however, as has been argued above, this is better taken as part of an hendiadys meaning "strength of spear-throwing." There is then nothing whatsoever in Achilles' words to suggest that he is acknowledging Agamemnon's authority. Rather he is accepting his excellence with the spear, and nothing else, and is saying "for we know by how much you excel all others and by how much you are the best in strength of spear-throwing."

When Agamemnon uttered his threat in *Iliad* 1 to take Achilles' girl Briseis as compensation for the loss of his own girl, he declared to Achilles that his purpose was

ὅφρ' ἐν εἰδήσιν
ὅσσον φέρτερός εἰμι σέθεν

"that you may learn well
how much greater I am than you"

1.185-186

and he received welcome confirmation of his status from Nestor at 1.281: "yet is this man [sc. Agamemnon] greater (φέρτερός) who is lord over more than you [sc. Achilles] rule." When Agamemnon despatched the embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* 9 he was even more explicit in his demand:

καί μοι ὑποστήτω, ὅσσον βασιλεύτερός εἰμι
ἦδ' ὅσσον γενεῇ προγενέστερος εὔχομαι εἶναι

"let him yield place to me, inasmuch as I am the kinglier
and inasmuch as I can call myself born the elder."

9.160-161

Agamemnon required of Achilles an acknowledgment that he was φέρτερος, βασιλεύτερος, and γενεῇ προγενέστερος. If Macleod is correct in asserting that in *Iliad* 23 we may see the winding up of the theme of the quarrel, and if critics are correct in their belief that Achilles, through his gesture at the prize-giving, accepts the authority of Agamemnon, it is perhaps surprising that Homer does not have Achilles explicitly acknowledge that authority. Yet far from recognising Agamemnon as greater, kinglier, or born the elder—which the inclusion of κράτει with προβέβηκας would have gone some way towards achieving—Achilles chooses instead to recognise his proficiency with the spear. With good reason we may ask, why?

It is some years since S. E. Bassett¹⁰ argued that the words of Achilles at 23.890-891, whilst perfectly in accord with the context of the spear-throwing competition, nevertheless have a very real ironical content. In the course of an unfavourable assessment of Agamemnon's character in the *Iliad*, Bassett pointed out that his *aristeia* in Book 11 is, in a number of respects, inferior to that of any other warrior. For example his opponent in single combat, Iphidamas, is a nonentity (11.221 ff.), whereas in every other instance the status of the opponent is such as to enhance the fame

¹⁰S. E. Bassett, "The ἀμαρτία of Achilles," *TAPA* 65 (1934) 47-69, at 53.

of the Achaian combatant; Agamemnon is the first hero in the poem to make a clean miss with a spear throw, missing both the intended victim and everybody else too (11.233); and he is the only warrior, on either side, to retire from battle because of pain from his wound rather than disablement (11.269 ff.). Homer's presentation of his *aristeia* seems designed to confirm Agamemnon's inferior warrior status and, in the light of this generally unfavourable portrait, Bassett concluded that it would be difficult to deny an ironical intention in Achilles' declaration ἴδμεν . . . ὅσσον δυνάμει τε καὶ ἡμασιν ἔπλεν ἄριστος.

There are two ways of viewing Achilles' assertion that Agamemnon is universally acknowledged to be the best spear-thrower amongst the Achaians: either he means what he says or he doesn't. If Bassett is correct then it can hardly be the former; in addition, even if Agamemnon's military career in the poem has indeed established him as the best spear-thrower, his acceptance of the prize without competing runs counter to the spirit of friendly competitiveness which pervades the other games. It is far more likely that Achilles does not in fact mean what he says, in which case two interpretations of his words seem possible: either he is, as most commentators accept, displaying his magnanimity by offering Agamemnon the opportunity to avoid the possible embarrassment of being defeated in the competition by the relatively inferior Meriones, or else he is attempting to humiliate Agamemnon by making a statement which all know to be incorrect and thereby inviting him to acknowledge that the embarrassment of defeat is a very distinct possibility by accepting the prize without competition. I wish to argue that this latter is the more likely and to suggest the possibility therefore that, unlike the other competitions which make up the funeral games for Patroklos, Achilles conducts the spear-throwing in a spirit not of magnanimity but rather of the same animosity which has characterised his dealings with Agamemnon throughout the poem.

An obvious objection to this proposal, over and above Achilles' words, is the very act of prize-giving. If Achilles' attitude to Agamemnon has indeed remained unchanged since Book 1, is it at all likely that he would display such generosity towards his hated adversary? Why should he not simply leave him to suffer the ignominy of defeat? In fact recent work on gift-economies suggests that his pressing of a gift upon Agamemnon is entirely apposite: "In such 'gift-economies' the highest premium is placed on generosity and display; superiority in gift-giving equates to superiority in social prestige."¹¹ The entire commemoration of Patroklos' death may be

¹¹ W. Donlan, "The Unequal Exchange Between Glaucus and Diomedes in Light of the Homeric Gift-Economy," *Phoenix* 43 (1989) 1-15. See also W. Donlan, "Reciprocities in Homer," *CW* 75 (1981-82) 137-175.

interpreted as a prolonged assertion of Achilles' social prestige: his allocation of prizes and their acceptance by his peers constitute an acknowledgment of his social superiority. It is therefore hardly accidental that the final recipient should be Agamemnon, with whom Achilles has throughout disputed the title ἀριστος; Agamemnon's placid, wordless acceptance of Achilles' gift is a final acceptance of his superiority. Far from "recognizing what he had so fiercely questioned in Book 1, that Agamemnon is 'best in power and years,'" Achilles is in reality requiring, and receiving, from Agamemnon the final acknowledgment of his capitulation. It is therefore not without significance that of the two prizes allocated it is Agamemnon's whose value is mentioned, "an unfired cauldron with patterns / of flowers on it, the worth of an ox," whilst Meriones walks off with the spear in symbolic acknowledgment of his warrior prowess.

Agamemnon's acceptance of Achilles' gift and consequent acceptance of his social superiority within the Achaian hierarchy is an entirely appropriate ending to the Achilles-Agamemnon tale, since it effectively reverses the issue which has been central to it. Achilles' refusal to accept Agamemnon's vast array of gifts in Book 9 constituted a refusal to accept his social superiority within the Achaian hierarchy: Agamemnon's offer was of course accompanied by a demand that Achilles acknowledge his superiority (9.158-162), a demand which Odysseus wisely chose not to convey to Achilles (9.300 ff.). The great value of the gifts was an indicator of Agamemnon's estimate of his own superiority. It may well be objected, however, that Achilles did indeed accept Agamemnon's superiority, by accepting in Book 19 the gifts originally offered in Book 9. Yet it is quite clear that Achilles goes out of his way in Book 19 to demonstrate his disdain for these gifts, and that his attitude is one of studied disregard and indifference: "the gifts are yours to give if you wish, and as it is proper, / or to keep with yourself. But now let us remember our joy in warcraft" (19.148-149). His concern is only with revenge upon Hektor, and he gives not even a backward glance to the gifts. Odysseus on the other hand insists upon the handing over of the gifts and upon the ritual of the communal feast, a speech which occasioned Page great amusement,¹² but which has the very serious purpose of attempting to reintegrate Achilles into heroic society (19.155-183). In his reply (19.199-214) Achilles declares that "at some other time rather you should busy yourself about these things," and he refuses to take any food or drink until he has his revenge; he does not even mention Agamemnon's gifts, although Odysseus had insisted that he should accept them. When the gifts are finally handed over and Agamemnon swears that he has not slept with Briseis, Achilles replies with an acknowledgment of the role of

¹²D. L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley 1963) 314.

Delusion (ἄτη) in all that has occurred, but again he makes no mention of the gifts.

Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἦ μεγάλας ἄτας ἄνδρεςσι διδοῖσθα.
οὐκ ἂν δὴ ποτε θυμὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσιν ἐμοῖσιν
Ἀτρεΐδης ὥρινε διαμπερές, οὐδέ κε κούρην
ἦγεν ἐμεῦ ἀέκοντος ἀμήχανος. ἀλλὰ ποθὶ Ζεὺς
ἦθελ' Ἀχαιοῖσιν θάνατον πολέεσσι γενέσθαι.
νῦν δ' ἔρχεσθ' ἐπὶ δαίπνον, ἵνα ξυνάγωμεν Ἄρηα.

Father Zeus, great are the delusions with which you visit men.
Without you, the son of Atreus could never have stirred so
the heart inside my breast, nor taken the girl away from me
against my will, and be in helplessness. No, but Zeus somehow
wished that death should befall great numbers of the Achaians.
Go now and take your dinner, so we may draw on the battle.

19.270–275

Both in his reference to his own attitude to Agamemnon's action of taking Briseis, and in his characterisation of Agamemnon as ἀμήχανος, Achilles exhibits an unforgiving stance. Of the four uses of ἀμήχανος in the poem, two are found in contexts which reveal an easy familiarity on the part of the speaker with the recipient of the apparent insult: at 16.29 Patroklos uses the term in addressing Achilles, and at 10.167 Diomedes calls Nestor ἀμήχανος; in both cases the term presents a picture of light banter between friends and is perhaps best translated "impossible." However in the two other occurrences it is clear that the term is intended to convey a very real and heartfelt animosity: at 13.726 Poulydamas uses the term to Hektor in asserting his shortcomings, and at 15.14 Zeus calls Hera ἀμήχανος whilst berating her for turning the tide of battle against the Trojans; in these two cases "stubborn" is perhaps a more likely translation. In Achilles' words at 19.270–275 it seems assured from its juxtaposition with ἐμεῦ ἀέκοντος that ἀμήχανος is to be understood in the latter sense, and that Achilles' bitterness remains. Thus although Achilles does indeed receive the gifts and although they are stored in his shelter, it is clear that he receives them on his own terms, not Agamemnon's, and that consequently there is no question of their acceptance constituting an acceptance also of Agamemnon's social superiority: "the poet meant, and the audience understood, that both men were using gift-giving in their ongoing agon over honor and status."¹³

In his recent discussion of the reconciliation of Achilles and Agamemnon Edwards characterised the scene thus: "their personalities are still totally incompatible, and even at their reconciliation Agamemnon tries to

¹³Donlan (above, n. 11) 6.

score off Achilles and the latter's heedlessness about whether or not he receives Agamemnon's lavish compensation is humiliating to his superior."¹⁴ The giving and receiving of Agamemnon's gifts signal the formal end to the quarrel of Book 1 as does the restoration of Briseis to Achilles. All their subsequent dealings are marked by a deference on Agamemnon's part to the wishes or commands of Achilles. At 19.310 Agamemnon is one of a number of heroes—Menelaos, Odysseus, Nestor, Idomeneus, and Phoinix—who try to comfort Achilles. At 22.378 ff. it is Achilles who orders the Achaian attack, but immediately calls it off because Patroklos lies unburied. At 23.49 ff. Achilles instructs Agamemnon to arrange the building of the funeral pyre for Patroklos. At 23.156 ff. he tells Agamemnon to dismiss the army to make ready their meal. At 23.236 ff. he tells Agamemnon and the rest to put out the flames of the pyre and to collect up Patroklos' bones. In each case Agamemnon and his fellow-heroes wordlessly do as instructed. At 23.257 ff. Achilles arranges the funeral games for Patroklos; and at 24.669 ff. he declares unilaterally to Priam that he will hold off the Achaian attack, as requested, in order to allow the burial of Hektor. From his studied indifference during the reconciliation, through his organisation of Achaian manpower including Agamemnon himself, to his arrangement of a truce with the enemy king, Achilles displays himself as the social and military superior. Thus his supposed recognition of Agamemnon as "best in power and years" not only misrepresents what he actually says, but manifestly runs counter to the pervading picture of his relations with Agamemnon in the final books of the poem.

In discussing the relationship of Book 23 to Book 24 Macleod points out that both books take up themes which go back to the very beginning of the poem. He suggests, for example, that Achilles' non-participation in the funeral games parallels his withdrawal from the fighting after the quarrel in Book 1; that the disputes over the allocation of prizes in the games, between Antilochos and Eumelos, and between Menelaos and Antilochos, parallel the dispute over booty in Book 1; and so on.¹⁵ I would like to suggest that in his words to Agamemnon at 23.890–894 Achilles too may be recalling the beginning of the poem, in that at the height of their quarrel Agamemnon referred to Achilles' prowess as an αἰχμητής:

εἰ δέ μιν αἰχμητὴν ἔθεσαν θεοὶ αἰὲν ἔόντες,
τοῦνεκά οἱ προθέουσιν ὀνείδεα μυθήσασθαι;

¹⁴M. W. Edwards, *The Iliad: A Commentary 5: Books 17–20* (Cambridge 1991) 235. See also O. Taplin "Agamemnon's Role in the *Iliad*," in C. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford 1990) 60–82.

¹⁵Macleod (above, n. 9) 30.

“And if the everlasting gods have made him a spearman,
yet they have not given him the right to speak abusively.”

1.290–291

It may well be, as has been suggested,¹⁶ that by declaring that Achilles' prowess as an αἰχμητής was a gift from heaven Agamemnon was intending to belittle it; nevertheless his main purpose was to declare that, however great Achilles' prowess might be, authority over the Achaian army remains his and that consequently Achilles is not entitled to speak abusively to or of the commander. At that moment of attempted reconciliation during the quarrel Agamemnon's response was to reaffirm his own social superiority in the Achaian hierarchy and to call Achilles an αἰχμητής. Now at this final meeting of the two long-standing rivals Achilles affirms his own social superiority and calls Agamemnon δυνάμει τε καὶ ἡμασιν ἄριστος.

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¹⁶S. R. van der Mije, “Achilles' God-Given Strength,” *Mnemosyne* 40 (1987) 241–267, at 241, quoting A. M. van Erp Taalman Kip, *Agamemnon in epos en tragedie* (Assen 1971).