

Mark Curcio

Prof. Cheney

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The Power of Voice in Achilles

Pantelis Michelakis writes that “the reception of Achilles into the arts and thoughts of the Western world has been dominated by his central position in Homer’s *Iliad*.”ⁱ It is true that the anger of Achilles is the central theme in the Homeric epic, but it is also his characteristics that drive his emotional turmoil from Book I until the very end. C.S. Lewis writes in his essay that an epic’s “greatness lies in the human personal tragedy built up against the background.”ⁱⁱ When it comes to Achilles, “the exposition of [his] superhuman characteristics makes him look like a demi-god.”ⁱⁱⁱ But what are these characteristics? To most readers of the *Iliad*, the only characteristics mentioned more frequently than none when it comes to Achilles is his strength, power, and devastation on the battle field. However, there is another power of Achilles that goes “unspoken,” even though it’s the power that can defeat kings, earn the respect of gods, make warriors bow down without drawing a sword, and even indirectly defeat the great Achilles. In Homer’s *Iliad*, Achilles is known for his strength and power in battle, but it is these traits along with the power of voice that solidifies Achilles as the symbol of absolute masculinity.

Many scholars disagree with this notion of the power of voice in Achilles. Some of them argue that Achilles is “childlike” and his language is nowhere near the articulation and prestige of an Odysseus or Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Gregory Nagy attempts to find the definition of “epic

hero” by discussing both Achilles and Odysseus in Chapter 6 of *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. He observes that both characters are “the centralized hero of each of the two epics,” but then places Achilles beneath Odysseus when it comes to wit and voice. He states that since Achilles has “epic supremacy as a warrior,” it is Odysseus that obtains his “own kind of epic supremacy as a master of crafty stratagems and cunning intelligence.”^{iv} By looking at certain passages within the *Iliad*, however, readers will notice that Achilles has intelligence and a voice and uses it well in necessary situations. Adam M. Parry, author of *The Language of Achilles*, defends this observation by stating, “the epic heroes live a life of action. Speech, counsel and monologue are seen as a form of action.”^v

It is Phoenix who speaks in Book IX of the *Iliad* about how he was chosen to raise Achilles and “teach him all things,” that a hero should know, and “to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds” (9.442-3). “The two are complementary halves of a hero’s abilities,” meant to be joined together to achieve one goal: “to acquire prestige among his fellows.”^{vi} Prestige is a trait that Achilles obtains from his fellow characters because of his fighting on the battle field, but he also *maintains* the prestige through speech and intimidation.

This is shown in the text in Book IX when Achilles speaks in front of the Greek army as “strong, swift, and godlike” (9.311), about how Agamemnon does not persuade him and tells everyone exactly how he sees the whole situation. After his 129 line speech, in which he finishes by mocking Agamemnon stating that he can either come with him or not, Homer writes, “He spoke, and they were hushed in silence, / Shocked by his speech and his stark refusal” (9. 442-3). The two points backed up by the text is how Homer describes the way in which Achilles spoke, and the way in which his fellow warriors reacted to his words. “Strong, swift, and godlike” are

adjectives usually given, especially by Homer, to warriors on the battlefield, but in this case, Homer gives them to Achilles when he is speaking. The reaction of the people around Achilles really shows the power of his voice in the way in which when he speaks, everybody listens, and no one dares to cut him off or speak against him. “Those who believe that Achilles is a hero without a social conscience have ignored a fundamental feature of his persona in this regard,”^{vii} and this is proven by that passage.

Achilles never strikes his nemesis Agamemnon, but when it comes to the power of voice, there is more than one occasion in which Achilles beats Agamemnon through humiliation and superiority in debate. The best example of this is when Achilles speaks his mind on the acts against a girl done by Agamemnon. In this part, Achilles uses reverse psychology by reminding Agamemnon that the girl is not the “ultimate goal of the warrior community,” but that the “sack of Troy” is.^{viii} Achilles’ statement only “exacerbates Agamemnon’s status problem” and only succeeds in blowing up their hatred for each other... “to Agamemnon it looks as though Achilles is deceitfully outranking him by “bidding” him, as one would an inferior.”^{ix} Agamemnon does respond back to Achilles’ disrespectful speech, but he does so in the way of insult, which is known to many as the language of defeat. Achilles defeats a king by just using his mind and opening his mouth, without even drawing his sword.

Achilles is put into another nonviolent verbal confrontation later on in the *Iliad* whenever the brave King Priam rides by himself from inside the protective walls of Troy to the tent of Achilles to plead for Hector’s body. This is the ultimate test of Achilles’ power of voice because not only does he have to say the right things to the broken King, but he must deal with the psychological tension that is ignited once Priam kisses his murderous hand. After this event,

Priam spills out his heart to Achilles and Homer writes that his words “welled up in Achilles” (24. 545). It is the power of voice that has silenced the great Achilles. It is the power of voice and emotion that has done to Achilles that no other warrior could do before, break down “the great runner.” But when it seems as if Achilles has nothing to say, Homer defies the reader, takes Achilles’ voice and pushes it to another level not yet before seen in the *Iliad*:

When Achilles had his fill of grief
 And the aching sorrow left his heart,
 He rose from his chair and lifted the old man
 By his hand, pitying his white hair and beard.
 And his words enfolded him like wings.

(24. 551-6)

“His words enfolded him like wings,” is a description of Achilles that the average *Iliad* reader would never associate with someone as “ruthless and powerful” as Achilles. However, Homer then refutes back to the ruthless Achilles as he then uses his voice to threaten not only Priam, but the gods as well, “So just stop stirring up grief in my heart, / Or I might not let you out of here alive, old man -- / Suppliant though you are – and sin against Zeus” (24. 615-6). How can a man who was only a few lines ago succumbed to sorrow have the emotional strain and tension to change feelings that quickly to go from sadness to anger? This shows the power of voice in Achilles of how he can change his feelings and express them in words, again, without raising a finger, only the volume of his voice. To show the effect of his threats in the form of words, Homer mentions that, “the old man was afraid and did as he was told” (24.617).

Even though the funeral of Hector ends the *Iliad*, the story of Achilles is continued by Sophocles. In this continuation, the inevitable happens as Achilles is finally killed. Throughout the *Iliad*, except not on the battlefield, it is the voice of Achilles that made things go his way through intimidation, debate, and deception. It is said that Achilles saw Polyxena, the daughter of King Priam, in the temple of Apollo and used his power of voice to “influence the Greeks to make peace with Troy”^x ultimately ending the war. However, Paris shot him with “a poisoned arrow, which, guided by Apollo, fatally wounded him in the heel.”^{xi} The two points that make this possible scenario interesting is that first, with the power of voice, the war could have been ended; but also because Achilles was talking and using his power of voice, he was shot from behind, which led to his demise. In part, it was the power of voice that killed Achilles, leaving him still undefeated on the battlefield.

“By speaking in strongly marked antitheses, refusing to anticipate objections, or to consider alternatives, and providing details of self-relevant background, Achilles shows himself a master of language.”^{xii} So why is Achilles’ power of voice so powerful in the *Iliad*? MacCary offers a possible explanation for this when he states that he does not speak to his fellows or for them, “he is an absolute rule unto himself” and though they see him as “a model by which to judge themselves, he uses none but himself to judge himself.”^{xiii} This along with his performance on the battlefield is what makes Achilles the symbol of absolute masculinity. Not only can he speak about doing things, defy the odds, and lead men into battle with memorable speeches, but he has the skill to back up his words.

- ⁱ Pantelis Michelakis, Achilles in Greek Tragedy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 1.
- ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, "Primary Epic: Technique and Subject," Parnassus Revisited (New York: American Library Assoc. 1973) 41.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Michelakis 156
- ^{iv} Gregory Nagy, "The Epic Hero," The Companion to Ancient Epic (2005) 78-9.
- ^v Adam M. Parry, The Language of Achilles (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 4.
- ^{vi} Parry 147
- ^{vii} Leonard Muellner, The Anger of Achilles (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996) 104.
- ^{viii} Muellner 104
- ^{ix} Muellner 105
- ^x "The Death of Achilles," 2002. Retrieved on 2008-2-17. < www.2020site.org/trojanwar/deathachilles.html >.
- ^{xi} "The Death of Achilles," 2002. Retrieved on 2008-2-17. < www.2020site.org/trojanwar/deathachilles.html >.
- ^{xii} W. Thomas MacCary, Childlike Achilles Ontogeny and Phylogeny in the Iliad (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 57-8.
- ^{xiii} MacCary 58