

RANSOM,  
REVENGE, AND  
HEROIC IDENTITY  
IN THE *ILIAD*



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## Ransom, Revenge, and Heroic Identity in the *Iliad*

From beginning to end of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon and Achilles are locked in a high-stakes struggle for dominance in which they attempt to impose competing definitions of rightful leadership, using competing definitions of loss incurred and the nature of the compensation owed. A typology of scenes involving *apoina* or “ransom” and *poine* or “revenge” is the basis of Donna Wilson’s detailed anthropology of compensation in Homer, which she locates in the wider context of agonistic exchange. Wilson argues that a struggle over definitions is a central feature of elite competition for status in the zero-sum and fluid ranking system that is characteristic of Homeric society. This system can be used to explain why Achilles refuses Agamemnon’s “compensation” in Book 9, as well as why and how the embassy tries to disguise it. *Ransom, Revenge, and Heroic Identity in the Iliad* examines the traditional semantic, cultural, and poetic matrix of which compensation in Homer is an integral part.

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

This book emerged from a dissertation presented to the faculty of the University of Texas in 1997 under the title *The Politics of Compensation in the Homeric Iliad*. The dissertation itself grew out of a presentation in a graduate seminar on the *Iliad*, though my interest in the poetics and politics of compensation was sparked much earlier in a Jewish studies seminar on Oral Torah. It has been my good fortune to have at every stage of this project a wealth of colleagues, teachers, and friends who invested their time, energy, and expertise in my work. It is a pleasure to thank them.

I am especially indebted to Erwin Cook for his guidance, critical insight, and unflagging support, from the genesis of the project to its published form. To Andrew Riggsby, Thomas K. Hubbard, Barbara Goff, J. Andrew Dearman, and Michael Gagarin I owe special thanks for reading and commenting on early versions of one or all of the chapters. Additionally, the first two chapters and the catalog benefited greatly from Raymond Westbrook's careful critique from the perspective of ancient Near Eastern law. Gregory Nagy read the entire manuscript and offered detailed and invaluable suggestions for revision, as did Walter Donlan, who also made available to me offprints of his own work. I owe many thanks to my colleagues Edward Harris, J. Roger Dunkle, Hardy Hansen, and Christopher Barnes for comments on the Introduction and first chapter and for many insightful conversations. I am also grateful for the generous and helpful suggestions made by the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. A portion of chapter 4 was presented orally for a Baylor University Colloquium in Classics in 1996 and later published as "Symbolic Violence in *Iliad* 9" in *Classical World* 93.2:132–47. Parts of chapters 1 and 4 were also presented at annual meetings of the American Philological Association in

1996 and 1998, at meetings of the Classical Association of the Mid-West and South and the Classical Association of the Atlantic States in 1996 and 1997, and for the Columbia Seminar in Classical Civilization in 1999. I profited immensely from the audience's questions and spirited discussion on each of these occasions. The students in my honors colloquium on reciprocity eagerly read the *Iliad* with me, and aggressively read and critiqued various anthropologies of exchange as approaches to Homeric society. Their rigorous engagement of texts and ideas, political savvy, and multicultural perspectives contributed immensely to me personally and to this book. And finally, this book would not have the form it has without the skillful editorial contributions of Beatrice Rehl, Helen Wheeler, and Helen Greenberg of Cambridge University Press. The errors that remain despite my learned colleagues' valiant efforts are entirely my own.

All translations of the *Iliad* are based on that of Lattimore (© 1951 by the University of Chicago Press), but with adjustments, and are used by permission of the University of Chicago Press. All other translations are my own.

Except where ambiguity might arise, references to the *Iliad* are by book and line number, without the name of the poem; *Od.* is used to cite the *Odyssey*. The Greek in the text and in the footnotes is translated with the exception of a few technical notes in appendix 1. I follow Lattimore's spelling of Greek names and transliterate other Greek words analogously, if not entirely consistently (e.g., *upsilon* is usually transliterated as *u* but *chi* as *kh*). Finally, there are a few Greek words that figure prominently in my discussion and that admit of no single translation that adequately compasses their thematic usage in the *Iliad*. I gloss or explain the thematic significance of these terms the first time they appear in the text; I then transliterate without translating them. For easy reference, I include here a list of these terms with the barest of definitions:

<i>apoina</i>	ransom
<i>biē</i>	force, violence
<i>dōra</i>	gifts (pl.)
<i>eris</i>	strife
<i>kleos (aphthiton)</i>	(unfading) fame, glory
<i>mētis</i>	cunning intelligence
<i>poinē</i>	repayment for loss; reparation or revenge
<i>polis</i> (pl., <i>poleis</i> )	city (a form of Greek sociopolitical organization dating from the eighth century B.C.E.)

<i>timē</i>	honor, value
<i>tisis</i>	repayment of harm for harm
<i>philos</i> (pl., <i>philoī</i> )	friend(s)

And now it remains only to acknowledge my own heroes: my children, Joel, Amanda, and Colin, whose patience and good humor with a mother who became an academic go beyond the call of duty; my mother, Berneda Wilson, who always believes in me; and my father, Thomas Wilson, whose memory is the wind beneath my wings. It is to them that this book is dedicated.



## Ransom, Revenge, and Heroic Identity in the *Iliad*



## INTRODUCTION

# Compensation and Heroic Identity

If we accept this book [*Iliad* 9] as original, we must regard Achilles as really inexorable . . .

Walter Leaf

Book 9 is, in the final analysis, the diamond in the jewel studded crown of Homer.

Wolfgang Schadewaldt

The embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* Book 9 has probably sparked more commentary and lively debate than any other passage in the poem.<sup>1</sup> The events themselves unfold straightforwardly enough. Nightfall at the end of Book 8 finds the Achaians hemmed in around their ships, desperate for a reprieve from Hektor's onslaught, and the Trojans camped on the plain, hopeful of victory on the coming day. As Book 9 opens, Agamemnon is urging the dispirited Achaians to beat an inglorious retreat. At Nestor's prompting, he determines instead to solicit Achilles' return by offering him goods, including Briseis, the girl whom the Greek commander had taken by force. Three emissaries – Odysseus, Phoinix, and Aias – convey the offer of goods and entreat the angry hero to reenter the fighting. Achilles refuses. Upon returning to Agamemnon's shelter, Odysseus declares the mission failed: "[Achilleus] refuses you and refuses your gifts" (9.679). And so the embassy and the Book conclude without advancing the course of the war significantly.<sup>2</sup>

*Iliad* Book 9 is widely regarded in contemporary Homeric scholarship as the interpretive key to the poem, the linchpin to its plot and tragic vision.<sup>3</sup> But Book 9 has not always been held in such esteem. In fact, the

consensus that it is pivotal emerged out of a debate over whether it is even fully integrated into the poem and, if so, what it contributes.<sup>4</sup> The history of the so-called Homeric question will be familiar to many readers, but it is worth revisiting briefly because it elucidates a thematic link between compensation and heroic identity. Moreover, it furnishes an account of how a prevailing modern conception of Achilles' heroic identity and, by extension, Homer's peerless ingenuity evolved.<sup>5</sup>

Difficulty with Book 9 arises primarily from a seeming contradiction between the events of the embassy and Achilles' words the next day, in Books 11 and 16. There he claims he is still awaiting supplication, gifts, and the return of Briseis and, further, that he would have already returned to the fighting had Agamemnon treated him kindly (11.609–10; 16.84–86 and 16.69–73). The Alexandrian scholars, the earliest text critics of Homer, did not detect any inconsistency between these passages. At least they did not betray as much by marking the lines in question as spurious. The apparent contradiction has, however, attracted the attention of Analysts, scholars who attempt to isolate a putative ur-text of the *Iliad* from subsequent accretions. Walter Leaf, for example, declares Achilles' words in Book 11 "meaningless" in light of the embassy's supplication; Gilbert Murray likewise judges them incongruous with Agamemnon's offer of "princely atonement" in Book 9.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, on the premise that the embassy conveys supplication and compensation, Analysts have maintained that Book 9 cannot be integrated satisfactorily into the *Iliad*.<sup>7</sup> They therefore banish it from reconstructions of the ur-text, or Wrath poem.

Since Book 9 has traditionally been a target of Analytic criticism, it has also become central to Unitarians, critics who maintain that the text is the unified creation of one poet. Unitarian scholars have now and again launched impassioned assaults against the *effect* of the Analytic method. John Scott epitomized their sentiments when he wrote, "There can be no Homeric scholarship, no literary appreciation under such [Analytic] leadership, for Homer ceases to be a poet and his work poetry."<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, Unitarians have conceded a discrepancy between Book 9 and Books 11 and 16, and have explained it as having occurred diachronically in the work of the same poet.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, like their Analyst forebears, they use Homer's presumed literacy to explain his errors. In this stratagem they are sometimes joined by oralists who use Homer's orality to the same end,<sup>10</sup> and by Neoanalytic scholars,<sup>11</sup> who accept that Homer draws on so many and so varied sources that narrative inconsistency is unavoidable. More generally, scholars who contend for the artistic unity of the poem have concluded that the contradiction is only apparent, resulting from a change

in the Achaians' circumstances,<sup>12</sup> diminution of Achilles' anger,<sup>13</sup> or the embassy's failure to meet Achilles' expectations.<sup>14</sup> Defense of Book 9 and the integrity of the Homeric poems has emerged most influentially, however, as an argument from unity of narrative design. In his seminal work *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, Cedric Whitman argues that the *Iliad* evinces a structural principle of concentricity known as ring-composition.<sup>15</sup> He accordingly arranges narrative units to show balanced symmetries and antitheses in the poem. On this basis Whitman claims that Books 9 and 16 are not in conflict but are, rather, associated by ring-composition: Book 16 completes and reverses Book 9.<sup>16</sup>

The conviction that Book 9 is integral to a coherent *Iliad* has, however, presented critics with an interpretive crux: what does the embassy scene contribute? The poet must have Achilles refuse the embassy's offer or the poem would be truncated by a premature reconciliation. Insofar as scholarly tradition presumes that Agamemnon offers compensation, the enigma with which critics have had to contend is why Achilles refuses it. Finding no material explanation for Achilles' behavior, Homer's modern interpreters have by and large turned to subjective or moral explanations. Whitman, for example, reads the *Iliad* as a study in heroic psychology and the characters as embodying different character types: Achilles reifies essential values and the human spirit and, accordingly, rejects material compensation; Agamemnon presents his opposite – psychology bound by material value.<sup>17</sup> On this view, the Achilles of Book 9 faces an ethical dilemma, and the poet is chiefly interested in the psychology of the hero's wrath. The enigma is thus resolved with an appeal to the "peculiar lot and sensitivity" of Achilles.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the embassy scene's contribution is, paradoxically, Achilles' refusal of the embassy's offer. To be sure, some critics have suggested that Achilles rejects Agamemnon's compensation because it is flawed by the condition of subordination that he attaches, which could only inflame Achilles' ego.<sup>19</sup> This approach, however, remains inherently psychological, and it leaves the relationship between the compensation and the attendant condition vague.<sup>20</sup>

The conclusion that an overwhelming majority of contemporary scholars have reached is that Achilles' refusal is unreasonable – in other words, incompatible with the social rules and values of Homeric society.<sup>21</sup> Achilles' refusal of Agamemnon's gifts has, moreover, been construed as a renunciation of material compensation for honor altogether. Further, his supposed rejection of material compensation has been perceived as an expression of his disillusionment with the materialist values of his society and with an established code of behavior often identified as the

heroic code. Accordingly, prevailing opinion either judges Achilles culpable for failing to abide by the code<sup>22</sup> or, more commonly, valorizes him as a champion of essential value.<sup>23</sup> Either way, he is regarded as alienated from the beliefs and values of heroic society. Critics have even identified Achilles' refusal of Agamemnon's gifts in Book 9 qua refusal of the heroic conception of honor as Homer's great contribution to the *Iliad*:

[T]he analytical method gives us insight into how Homer transformed the character of Achilles from a rather simple person, angry over the loss of Briseis, who sulks in his tent until his friend is killed, and is ultimately forced to rejoin the heroic society he was angry with, to a man who is driven to question, and eventually to reject, the values upon which that society is based.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, a dispute over compositional integrity has led many critics who argue for the narrative coherence of the *Iliad* to defend Book 9 as making a fundamental contribution to the thematic development of the poem. At the same time, identification of Agamemnon's gifts as compensation has induced them by and large to interpret Achilles' refusal, and thus his heroic identity, in ethical and psychological terms. These convergent trends in Homeric studies have produced a vast body of scholarship that pronounces the embassy scene not just integral, but pivotal to our *Iliad*, in that it transforms an otherwise traditional hero into a nontraditional one, a traditional poet into a singular innovator who transcends poetic tradition, and a traditional poem into literature. Or as Jasper Griffin puts it, "The refusal of Achilles to yield is the central fact in the creation of the *Iliad* from the traditional plot of the hero's withdrawal and triumphant return."<sup>25</sup>

The foregoing survey of Homeric scholarship has offered a historical account of an approach to the *Iliad* that has been with us for a long time and has influenced academic and popular interpretation alike. Most of these views assume a common problem – "Achilleus rejects material compensation" – and adopt subjective approaches to resolve it. As a result, an "essential" conception of Achilleus' heroic identity has been all but naturalized for modern readers. This raises the question of to what extent mainstream twentieth-century scholarship on Achilleus and a presumed crisis in his heroic identity imported a modern interest in psychology and romantic ideals of originality and, as a result, created a hero in our own image.<sup>26</sup> The logical conclusion of this approach seems to be that we share a fundamental worldview with Achilleus and, by extension, with Homer: Achilleus comes to represent "us"; Agamemnon

and the normative pressures of heroic society “them.” On this view, what “we” share with Homer and Achilles is a hierarchical valuation of the essential over the material and innovation over tradition. One must wonder, however, whether Homer or his audience would subscribe to either of those hierarchies.

Two objections come immediately to mind. The first is that the conventional claim that the epic poet sang the truth of a distant heroic past requires that he deny that he *ever* innovates.<sup>27</sup> And this assertion is no mere conceit; it is fundamental to the poet’s claim of authenticity and validity in an oral and traditional society. Thus, oralist approaches that build on the pioneering work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord offer a different and, to my mind, more satisfactory account of matters in that they take into consideration what a poet working within the system thinks he is doing.<sup>28</sup> Traditional poetry, of course, admits of change in language and content, but it does so, according to oralist interpretation, precisely because each performance entails a recomposition of the poet’s inherited material.<sup>29</sup> Instead of positing a hierarchical opposition between innovation and tradition, oralists contend that “innovation takes place within the tradition.”<sup>30</sup> And as a result “we can consider Homer a master poet *without* abandoning our belief that he works *within* a traditional performance medium.”<sup>31</sup>

A second objection is that, while there may be value in exploring the psychology of Homer’s characters, it is all but impossible to explore Homeric psychology apart from the sociocultural background of Homeric society.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, the critic cannot ascertain the nature of Achilles’ wrath and refusal of the embassy’s offer and cannot infer the extent to which Homer may privilege the essential over the material without knowing the vocabulary, forms, and social meanings of compensation in Homer. As important, one must also know what a slight is and whether domination is an expected social goal. Arthur Adkins’ work on honor and value in Homeric society laid indispensable semantic and social groundwork for investigating these questions.<sup>33</sup> Subsequent anthropological studies by Thomas Beidelman and Walter Donlan, among others, have shown that Homeric society comprises a fluid *timē* (honor)-based system in which rank is under constant negotiation and in which elite warriors try to establish status in relation to one another through agonistic exchange.<sup>34</sup> In such a fluid hierarchy, Agamemnon’s gifts may be understood as part of a strategy of domination: a “gift-attack.”<sup>35</sup> By showing that Achilles’ refusal is consistent with the status economies of heroic society, social-anthropological approaches have seriously undermined the