

§18. The Quarrel



Thou art to me most hateful of all kings Zeus ever nurtured . . .

– *Iliad* 1:176

And now we come to *Iliad* 1 and the Menis. Here, we may be sure, we are reading the actual historical Homer. Achilles is the focus of the story. Let us, in setting out, simply listen to the way Achilles is introduced. Much of the experience of early hearers is lost to us – changes of tempo, vocal tone, or facial expression, by which the singer conveyed a mood or individuated a character. What survives is the style, the poem’s way of using the language. With our stylistic test, we hope to follow that aspect with special care. Any statistical test is subject to static, and many of these speeches are below the recommended minimum size, when false positives are more likely. But such results can still be suggestive, and we will compare those readings with the comments of Kirk. We will see the antagonists at first closely engaged, and gradually drifting apart into irreconcilable positions.

First, this preliminary scene, which sets the stage for what follows.

Chryses

Here on the beach where the ships are drawn up, comes Chryses, priest of Apollo, offering ransom for his daughter who has been seized in a Greek raid, and is now the prize of the Greek leader, Agamemnon. Their dialogue:¹

- Ch1. 17-21 (5) ⌈ *Chryses appeals for return of his daughter
 Ag1. 26-32 (7) *Agamemnon refuses
 Ch2. 37-42 (5) ⌋ *Chryses prays to Apollo, to punish the Greeks

<i>Iliad</i> 1	Ch1*	Ag1*	Ch2*
	34	56	43
Ch1*	~	0.68	0.40
Ag1*	0.68	~	0.66
Ch2*	0.40	0.66	~

The appeals of Chryses are stylistically close, whether because he is distinctive as a character, or because of generic similarity (both speeches are appeals).

Now we come to the Quarrel proper, a rapid-fire exchange.

¹Asterisks will mark speeches below the recommended minimum size.

Here are the first nine speeches, with their verse counts. We indicate with brackets consecutive speeches which are stylistically close:

Ac1. 59-67 (7)	[*Achilles opens council; invites suggestions
Ca1. 74-83 (10)		*Calchas' response, asks safety if he speaks
Ac2. 85-91 (7)	[*Achilles guarantees his safety
Ca2. 93-100 (8)		*Calchas, suggests return of Chryseis
Ag2. 106-120 (15)	[Furious response by Agamemnon
Ac3. 122-129 (8)		*Achilles objects
Ag3. 131-147 (17)	[Agamemnon escalates his threat
Ac4. 149-171 (23)		Achilles threatens to leave Troy
Ag4. 173-187 (15)		Agamemnon dares Achilles to do so

<i>Iliad</i> 1	Ac1*	Ca1*	Ac2*	Ca2*	Ag2	Ac3*	Ag3	Ac4	Ag4
	71	75	50	58	118	54	129	173	120
Ac1*	~	0.46	0.78	0.59	0.75	0.67	0.71	0.74	0.46
Ca1*	0.46	~	0.62	0.88	0.82	0.67	0.76	0.62	0.61
Ac2*	0.78	0.62	~	0.66	0.54	0.59	0.83	0.40	0.59
Ca2*	0.59	0.88	0.66	~	0.42	0.41	0.60	0.66	0.60
Ag2	0.75	0.82	0.54	0.42	~	0.60	0.88	0.60	0.76
Ac3*	0.67	0.67	0.59	0.41	0.60	~	0.49	0.46	0.53
Ag3	0.71	0.76	0.83	0.60	0.88	0.49	~	0.67	0.58
Ac4	0.74	0.62	0.40	0.66	0.60	0.46	0.67	~	0.62
Ag4	0.46	0.61	0.59	0.60	0.76	0.53	0.58	0.62	~

Moving down the diagonal, we find three consecutive speech-and-response pairs. They are:

- Achilles' speech opening the council, to solve the problem of the plague, is close to Calchas' speech, the first response to that invitation (D = 0.46). He is assured of safety in speaking, in the intervening speech of Achilles (ac2).
- Calchas says Chryseis must be returned. Agamemnon, whose prize she is, is infuriated, and responds in a stylistically similar speech (D = 0.42).
- Achilles then intervenes, and draws an angry response from Agamemnon. These two speeches are also close (D = 0.49).

The next two speeches *not* stylistically close. There is hostility but also a certain solidness. That change of tone has been noticed. Here is G S Kirk:

- 151. "... reference to the journey to Chryse proposed by Agamemnon, with the rest of the verse as *transition to the idea Achilles wants to develop*, namely *the reasons for fighting*."
- 167-168. "The note of *pathos*, prominent from 161 on, continues. . ."

Especially insightful is Kirk on Agamemnon's speech, following:

- 172-177. Agamemnon begins *calmly*, by contrast, and is both sarcastic and *complacent*.

The stylistic separation, agrees with Kirk's sense of their different tone.

So Chryseis will be returned and Agamemnon will take Briseis for himself. It remains to get rid of the accumulated hostility. That is attempted by two outsiders. First, Athena, who appears invisibly to Achilles, and to no one else:

- Ac5 202-205 (3)
 - At1 207-214 (8)
 - Ac6 216-218 (3)
- { *Achilles is about to draw his sword
 { *Athena grabs him by the hair, dissuades him
 { *Achilles briefly agrees; sheathes his sword

<i>Iliad l</i>	<i>Ac5*</i>	<i>At1*</i>	<i>Ac6*</i>
	28	65	23
<i>Ac5*</i>	~	0.34	0.54
<i>At1*</i>	0.34	~	0.45
<i>Ac6*</i>	0.54	0.45	~

The intimacy of this encounter is mirrored by the stylistic closeness of the three speeches: B is close to A, and C in its turn is close to B..

That consistency of tone, that mutual confidence, is also noted by Kirk:

- 207-214. “The short sentences . . . suit the urgency of the occasion, but also suggest an effortless confidence.”
- 215-217. “Achilles’ three-verse reply maintains the small scale and low key of Athena’s 8-verse speech of advice which precedes it. The whole episode, indeed, after Achilles’ initial violent impulse, is kept severely in place . . . Achilles’ uncharacteristic reasonableness . . .”

However, for all that interlude of intimacy and agreement, the hard feelings continue. It will require one more intervention, not by a god but by the greatly respected Nestor, who addresses himself chiefly to Agamemnon, to bring the quarrel to an end.

Here are the speeches in that second intervention:

- Ac7 225-244 (20)
 - Ne1 254-284 (31)
 - Ag5 286-291 (6)
 - Ac 8 293-303 (11)
- { Achilles is still furious and accusatory
 { Nestor urges that both be reasonable
 { *Agamemnon ignores N’s argument
 { Achilles, still angry, makes one concession

<i>Iliad l</i>	<i>Ac7</i>	<i>Ne1</i>	<i>Ag5*</i>	<i>Ac8</i>
	151	228	45	94
<i>Ac7</i>	~	0.57	0.55	0.33
<i>Ne1</i>	0.57	~	0.56	0.53
<i>Ag5*</i>	0.55	0.56	~	0.53
<i>Ac8</i>	0.33	0.53	0.53	~

After his outburst in 225-244, Achilles throws down his speaker’s staff: for him, the council is over. This is mirrored stylistically in the fact that *no subsequent speech* is stylistically close to what precedes it. The former direct engagement of the antagonists no longer exists.

Of Agamemnon, in this section, Kirk observes:

- 286-291. “. . . every single part of Nestor’s speech is studiously ignored.”

As for Achilles, his last speech makes one concession (he accepts the loss of Briseis). There is a nominal response to Agamemnon (Ag8, D = 0.53, the near end of normal), but he has chiefly in mind his own position in Ac7 (D = 0.33, the closest similarity of any two speeches in this part of Iliad 1).

Discussion is indeed at an end.

A “lookback” effect is also seen in the earlier speeches. Here they are again, but this time with some more remote stylistic similarities bracketed:

Ac1. 59-67 (9)	┌	*Achilles opens council; invites suggestions
Ca1. 74-83 (10)		*Calchas asks for safety in speaking
Ac2. 85-91 (7)	┌	*Achilles assures his safety
Ca2. 93-100 (8)	┌	*Calchas suggests return of Chryseis
Ag2. 106-120 (15)		Furious response by Agamemnon
Ac3. 122-129 (8)	└	*Achilles objects
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<i>Iliad 1</i>	<i>Ac1*</i>	<i>Ca1*</i>	<i>Ac2*</i>	<i>Ca2*</i>	<i>Ag2</i>	<i>Ac3*</i>	<i>Ag3</i>	<i>Ac4</i>	<i>Ag4</i>
	71	75	50	58	118	54	129	173	120
<i>Ac1*</i>	~	0.46	0.78	0.59	0.75	0.67	0.71	0.74	0.46
<i>Ca1*</i>	0.46	~	0.62	0.88	0.82	0.67	0.76	0.62	0.61
<i>Ac2*</i>	0.78	0.62	~	0.66	0.54	0.59	0.83	0.40	0.59
<i>Ca2*</i>	0.59	0.88	0.66	~	0.42	0.41	0.60	0.66	0.60
<i>Ag2</i>	0.75	0.82	0.54	0.42	~	0.60	0.88	0.60	0.76
<i>Ac3*</i>	0.67	0.67	0.59	0.41	0.60	~	0.49	0.46	0.53
<i>Ag3</i>	0.71	0.76	0.83	0.60	0.88	0.49	~	0.67	0.58
<i>Ac4</i>	0.74	0.62	0.40	0.66	0.60	0.46	0.67	~	0.62
<i>Ag4</i>	0.46	0.61	0.59	0.60	0.76	0.53	0.58	0.62	~

We may now consider these more remote instances.

The speech labeled Ac3, besides giving what Agamemnon will respond to, itself looks back (D = 0.41) to the speech of Calchas, Ca2, which said that Chryseis must be returned. The consequences for Achilles are now clearer, and it natural that Achilles, as he initiates the next exchange, should have it in mind.

Ac4 has in mind his guarantee to Calchas (Ac 2, D = 0.40’ a speech with no other close relations in this vicinity) Again, he focuses on the beginning of the quarrel. So does Agamemnon; his Ag4 responds not to the preceding speech of Achilles, but to Achilles’ opening speech (Ac1, D = 0.46). Already in that speech, at line 109, Achilles had pointedly singled out the “Son of Atreus.”

Kirk remarks, at 59-67, “It is worth noticing that Achilles’ opening remarks to Agamemnon are perfectly unprovocative.”

For once, we venture to disagree. In pointing his first question *at Agamemnon*, and not at the assembly as a whole, Achilles had initiated the heated exchanges between himself and Agamemnon which follows. As we have seen above, the two drift apart stylistically at the conclusion of the quarrel. In his last speech, rather than respond to the preceding speech of Achilles, Agamemnon “looks back” to the beginning of the quarrel. It is all over; the quarrel as a whole is ended, and as it were framed, by that lookback.

Is any of this plausible for the historical Achilles and Agamemnon?

We answer: There *are* no historical Achilles and Agamemnon. They are figments of the poet’s imagination. What we are here seeing is the function those speeches had, in the poet’s own conception of the nature, the progress, and the resolution, of the quarrel with which he has chosen to begin his work.

Conclusion

We suggest that stylistics may usefully point to a little-noticed device of the poet: the linking of speeches for expressive effect. And for that effect to occur, no conscious effort need be posited. The poet need only “have in mind” the preceding speech, or some more distant speech, for a similar stylistic coloring to occur, as it were spontaneously.

As for what these literary figments themselves “had in mind,” note that in Achilles’ line 122 (“greediest for gain”) and in Agamemnon’s line 132 (“strive to cheat”), we have open signs of a previous enmity, an enmity which is surprising on a surface reading of the text, but which makes sense in terms of what will follow as the quarrel develops.

We may further note that the device of pairing, on which we here chiefly focus, is of wide occurrence in early texts. Examples would include the twinned sayings of Confucius in the Analects, the amorous dialogue of the lovers in the Song of Songs, the question-and-answer form of the Wúdz military text, or that of the Questions of King Milinda. When two persons, or two viewpoints, are closely engaged, we should not be surprised to find *stylistic* pairing also.

And, as at the end of the Quarrel, we should also not be surprised to find the plot line reflected by the device of *unpairing*, a somewhat more subtle matter, one not as easily noticed by critics who read the story without that assistance. The disengagement of characters in a story is also a device of the storyteller.

It may be asked, What does the BIRD test add, to what any decently sensitive reader might have seen without it? These concluding paragraphs may serve as our best answer.