Duelling with Gifts in the Iliad: As the Audience Saw It

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by WALTER DONLAN

The "wrath" (mēnīs) of Achilles and the "quarrel" (neikos) between him and Agamemnon are the controlling themes of the Iliad. Probably no other Homeric question has received more attention, yet with less agreement among critics, than the "meaning" of these to the poem. This present attempt to explain the Wrath and Quarrel incorporates a sociocultural reading that puts the original audience in the foreground and tries to imagine the action as they might have imagined it when they heard what we read today. Obviously, if we can know what the audience knew, we will know the poem better. We cannot discover from the poems alone how the audiences received the poems. For that we need a considerable social context; and that requires an excursus into the complicated and controversial historiography of "Dark Age" Greece (roughly 1100-700 B.C.).

1. Knowing What the Audience Knew

An increasing volume of archaeological research centered on the Dark Age during the past decades has significantly broadened our knowledge of that previously blank period, so that we may now claim a pretty good understanding of its culture, especially for the better attested Geometric Period (900-700 B.C.), when epic was developing into its final form. Most of the new data have come from wide-area or "survey archaeology," which concentrates on the rural landscape and its non-elite settlements (as opposed to the traditional emphasis on single major sites). Regional surveys also employ the multidisciplinary methods of the "new archaeology" or "social archaeology," so called because it attempts to elicit information about the entire system represented by the material finds: settlement patterns, demography, economic strategies, and even social and political organization and belief system.1

From their material profiles, the small communities of this period closely fit the models of social and political organization called "ranked society" and "chiefdom" by anthropologists. Morton Fried (1967) describes the "ranked society" as an evolutionary stage between "egalitarian" and "stratified" (or "state") societies, indicated by the differential in access to or control over resources and status positions. In a rank society the elites have a monopoly on the positions of authority but cannot withhold access to the means of subsistence,


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the step that heralds the arrival of the stratified stage. Fried's rank form broadly corresponds to Elman Service's (1975) "chiefdom" level of sociopolitical integration in his postulated series of a "segmental stage" (the egalitarian band and tribe), the "chiefdom," and "archaic civilization" (i.e., the state). The "chief," who holds an institutionalized "office," is a man of great personal authority and prestige, yet with very limited power to coerce.

These ethnographic parallels come readily to mind when we contemplate the remains of the little farming villages of the time, unassuming clusters of one- and two-room mud-brick houses, with populations of a few dozen to several hundred people, often containing, as the only imposing structure in the settlement, a greatly enlarged version of the basic house, identified by the investigators as the "chief's house."2 Since the "new archaeology" has its roots in social anthropology, current Mediterranean archaeologists have naturally gravitated to these analytical models to explain the material developments they observe,3 just as anthropologically oriented historians have found them useful to explain Homeric society.

Of course, the pertinent question is not the objective reality of the society in which the singers and their audiences lived, but how closely, if at all, the fictional world of the poems reflected that material and social reality. This is a controversy that has long boiled among archaeologists and historians; it cannot be avoided here, but I will try to be brief.

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in essentially the form we have them today, were composed between about 750 and 700 B.C. All agree that they were not only the creations of a single, or perhaps two separate, brilliant poet(s), though they certainly were that, but also—and this has been our key to understanding the poetic process—they were composed within an ancient and unbroken oral-poetic tradition reaching back centuries through the long, materially poor Dark Age into the rich Late Bronze Age.4 The highly advanced "Mycenaean" civilization, which collapsed and vanished shortly after 1200 B.C., was the dimly remembered setting of the poems, the time the Greeks recalled as their Heroic Age.

Herein lies the controversy. Many scholars take the position that since epic poetry was a continuous process of oral performance-composition by generations of illiterate bards, using and changing, subtracting from and adding to, the hoard of formulas and formulaic elements, the "world" described in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* must therefore be an artificial, eclectic amalgam of material features, social institutions and customs spanning nearly five centuries.5 That notion of a crazy-quilt pattern of many cultural layers has been vigorously opposed by a growing body of historical-anthropological analysis of the texts, which has

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4. The originator of the "oral poetry" theory, which revolutionized Homeric studies and has deeply influenced the whole field of oral poetry studies, was Milman Parry (1971); Lord (1960). While the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition has won general acceptance, it is in constant process of refinement and revision. On the current state of the question see Kirk (1985) 1-37; Heubeck (1988) 3-23; Foley (1988). Janko (1992) 8-19 dates the *Iliad* to between 750 and 725 and the *Odyssey* to 743-714; see also Janko (1992) 8-19.
demonstrated that the social milieu created by the poets forms a coherent social system that is consistent within each of the poems and also between them.

The great and early champion of this view, that the epics offer us the “raw materials for the study of a real world of real men, a world of history not of fiction,” was M. I. Finley, whose ground-breaking *The World of Odysseus* (published in 1954) introduced classicists to the potential of an anthropological approach to the epics. Although his idea that Homer presents us with an actual historical society has met with considerable resistance, Finley’s reply to his critics twenty years later remains irrefutable. Either the oral poets were drawing on a real society or, “by a most remarkable intuition,” they had stitched together an interlocking system of institutions and values that anthropologists three thousand years later would discover to be universal social patterns.6

The simple fact is that when we peel away the obvious heroizing embellishments and deliberate anachronisms that helped to create the desired “epic distancing,” the picture of life that emerges matches the observed material and economic conditions of the Dark Age villages. Moreover—and this would seem to clinch the argument—Homer’s society conforms both in general and in detail to the anthropological model of the semi-egalitarian ranked society. These congruences give us faith that we see reflected in the epics the image, though admittedly an indirect and distorted one, of a living social order.7

This position gets support from what appears to be a universal rule of storytelling: a basic plausibility and verisimilitude. The circumstances and settings may be utterly unreal, yet still the story is rooted in the social and psychological experiences of the listeners.8 We can easily illustrate this from Homer. Although ninth- and eighth-century weapons were made of iron, Homeric warriors fight only with bronze weapons, like the Mycenaeans. The major heroes drive up to the battle lines in two-horse chariots, dismounting to fight on foot; this is generally considered to be a garbled memory of Mycenaean chariot warfare. These anachronistic details we recognize as standardized conventions that transport the hearers to that imaginary “time when.” On the other hand, we know for a fact that wars and raids were a constant and major element of contemporary life, and so we do not doubt that what the poems say about the qualities and attributes that made up a good warrior, or about the drive for honor and the fear of public shame that pushed men into mortal combat, or the joy and terror of battle, or the sufferings of innocent victims, corresponded to the listeners’ opinions about these things. Were it otherwise, the dissonance would be insupportable.

7. The more pressing question today is when to “date” Homeric society. The old view, that it preserves essentially Mycenaean institutions and practices, is now thoroughly discredited; see Dickinson (1986). Finley himself (1978) placed the society of the poems in the tenth and ninth centuries; others believe that it reflects the conditions of the “poet’s own day,” i.e., the later eighth century (Morris [1986]); others, myself included, see the period from about 850 to about 750 as the most probable time frame of the poems’ social “background.” For a full discussion of the various views on these matters, see Raafälb (1991).
8. Redfield (1975) 23, 35-39, 78-79. For oral poetry in general compare Finnegan (1992), who emphasizes the importance both of the audience and the performance. On oral literature as a “reflection of society” and the desirability of contextual analysis, see especially chs. 7 and 8.
Homeric chiefs and their guests consume enormous numbers of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs in huge feasting-halls decorated in bronze, silver and gold, drinking endless quantities of wine out of gold and silver cups, waited on by a throng of attendants. These hyperboles are spice for the imagination; yet underlying the exaggerations and Mycenaean evocations is a core of reality. Like their counterparts in ethnographically attested advanced big-man and -chief societies, Dark Age chiefs (basileis) did in fact give lavish meat-feasts in order to display their wealth and win followers and gain renown; and, of great importance for our reading of such scenes, the listening audiences understood the instrumental purposes behind these displays of largesse.

This brings us to the heart of the question. Greek epic poetry is highly sociological in content; in both the Iliad and the Odyssey the elements of plot, theme, character and motivation revolve around status- and power-relationships. A coherent sociology of Homer is absolutely necessary, therefore; without it, we could not make any sense of such matters. The question is, should we derive the “mentalities” from an artificial, totally self-contained poetical universe, as indicated by the “many layers” theory, or from the empirically verifiable institutions and behaviors of the living society? Remarkably, with some notable exceptions, Homeric literary critics have preferred to do the former.9

Still, even an imaginary construct needs a coherent social and social-psychological frame. The unfortunate model of choice, since the beginning of modern Homeric scholarship, has been feudal-age Europe. Archaeology and anthropology have had some effect in toning down the more blatant identities, and so we are spared from the “liege lords,” “vassals” and “feudal tenures” that peppered the commentaries of the last century and the first half of this one. The essential model remains ingrained in Homeric scholarship, nevertheless; current translations, commentaries and literary studies continue to speak of kings and queens, princes and aristocrats, serfs and peasants, palaces and royal estates; “knights” still follow a code of chivalry elevated above the “simple concerns of the commons.”

So great a distortion of the underlying sociological reality is bound to distort our understanding of the poetry. We come closer to its spirit when we connect poets and their audiences together in their shared experience of the world about them. In the following pages I set forth what I believe to be a reasonable description of that sharing process. Unlike written poetry, which is strictly a private act, oral poetry, which is produced in performance, is more a collaboration between the “singer” (aoidos) and his immediate audience. Surely, the Iliad and Odyssey (and all other surviving specimens of oral epic) are the polished products of many such composition-performances. In that setting, poet and

9. We see the lines drawn in Griffin’s reaction to Redfield’s (1975) “essentially sociological and anthropological approach”: (1980)145-46. Firmly committed to an interior, psychological interpretation of motivations, Griffin warns of “the risks in applying too anthropological an analysis to the poem”: (1980) 74, note 46. And compare Redfield’s “Foreword” in Nagy (1979) vii-xiii. “Sociological and anthropological” readings are appearing in greater numbers, yet, as Martin (1989) notes, while a “fresh emphasis on a sociocultural reading of [Greek] tragedy and comedy” has invigorated these fields and cut them “loose from the bonds of New Criticism . . . Homer has become for some a haven safe from critical storms.”
audience cooperate within the shared knowledge, not just of the traditional plots, themes and characters, but also of the mechanics and aesthetics of poetic composition, and from shared mental structures derived from their common social experience. Audiences are well educated in the highly stylized genre of traditional narrative, and are skilled judges of how well, or not, the performing poet has met the objective requirements of his art.

It follows that the motives of the epic actors for doing and saying what the poet has them do and say are conditioned by the everyday structures and norms of behavior; and, of course, these same awarenesses are the basis for the audiences' own value judgements about actions and motives. Let me interject here that the singer holds the place of honor among the Dark Age craftsmen for his uncanny power to charm his listeners, recognized as supernaturally inspired; his song contains within it the wisdom of the society. His art is then never just entertainment, but serves an important social function by presenting for popular reflection the complexities of life, expressed in terms of conflict and resolution.

The externalized, "objective" narrative form does not allow the poet much scope to editorialize, to make overt his authorial judgements about the behavior of his characters. Thus only rarely, and for the most part with only minor effect, does the oral poet intrude his opinion. Yet he does have opinions, and even in his guise as the self-effacing narrator is able to express them. He conveys his meanings and intentions through his characters’ deeds and words, manipulating both the sociological content of the situations and the conventional or expected poetic treatment of these familiar themes, confident that his audience will be looking for, and will appreciate, the variations and nuances that guide them to this particular song’s representations of character and behavior. So, each performance is a kind of dialogue, issuing from the audience’s cultural, ethical, and literary expectations, and the poet’s playing with and on those expectations.

2. Duelling With Gifts

The struggle, agôn, between Agamemnon and Achilles is all about “honor,” the highest social value, summed up in the powerful word timê; and it is waged entirely within the context of gift-giving. Timê, along with its verbs tiô and timao, embraces the range of concepts covered by our words honor, dignity, respect, status, and prestige. Since the act of “honoring” is always accompanied by a

10. Compare the perceptive remarks of Martin (1989) 5-7, 47, 89-94, 96, 129, 161, 170, 176, 225, 231-33. Martin focuses on the level of language and “performance” (both by the poet and by the characters he has created); I emphasize here the audiences’ sociological expectations. Wyatt (1989) shows that the collaboration extended to the content itself. The oral poet “sang what he wanted, but was constantly checked and corrected by the audience,” who could request an episode, object to it or insist on its lengthening (e.g., at Od. 1.337-43; 8.98-99, 492, 537-38; Books 9-12); presumably they could also insist on his shortening or omitting an episode (253). Cf. Nagy (1990a) 27, 39, 42, 131.

11. “For among all men who dwell on earth singers have a portion of timê and aids, because the Muse has taught them songs and she loves the tribe of singers” (Od. 8.479-81). Cf. Od. 8.62-64, 74; 17.518-20; 22.344-48; Hesiod Theog. 22-34. On the social functions of Greek epic poetry, see Havelock (1963) 61-95; Russo (1978) 1 use the terms Homer, poet, singer and narrator interchangeably, understanding with Richardson (1990) 4 that the “narrator” and the “implied author” are the same. Cf. Edwards (1987) 29-41.

validating ceremony or gift, the idea of *timē* is indistinguishable from its signs. Thus the abstract noun *timē* is also used concretely to mean rank, for example, the “office” itself of *basileus*. So, too, *geras*, the “prize of honor” awarded to the leader as leader, is frequently a metaphor for his social position.

In a culture where a man’s self-image is totally derived from others’ opinions of him, any loss of *timē* or *geras* seems unbearable and must be reversed. Accordingly, the *timē*-words are often translated as “compensation,” “recompense,” “penalty,” to convey the Greek idea that one who has been dishonored (*atimos*) will insist on repayment of the portion of honor taken from him. In Homer, to give, take away or pay back *timē* involves a transfer of valuable objects. Thus, in Homeric, as in virtually all archaic societies, gift-giving is a social mechanism of the highest importance. Among the elite particularly, the complicated etiquette of the gift—who gives, who takes, and under what circumstances—is enlisted as a major competitive strategy, to demonstrate, and even to establish, gradations in status and authority.  

It is by *giving* gifts especially that one man gains power over another; generous gifts publicly proclaim the giver’s potency and, at the same time, put the receiver under obligation. Marcel Mauss, in his 1925 classic, *Essai sur le don*, elegantly stated the essence of the gift-based economy; it is worth quoting in full for its relevance to Homeric society.

If one hoards, it is only to spend later on, to put people under obligation and to win followers. Exchanges are made as well, but only of luxury objects like clothing and ornaments, or feasts and other things that are consumed at once. Return is made with interest, but that is done in order to humiliate the original donor or exchange partner and not merely to recompense him for the loss that the lapse of time causes him.  

It is in this context of calculated generosity that we must view the contest between the two chiefs, each of whom can claim to be the “best of the Achaeans,” *aristos Achaion*. My argument is this. The narrative structures their *agon* as a competition in gift-giving. That would have been clear to audiences who daily observed the ritualized display behavior of their *basileis*. As the narrative proceeds, there are constant indications that Achilles is the winner in *timē* all along. This too would have been clear to the listeners at every point in the long story of the Quarrel.

The *Iliad* begins with two gross violations of normal and expected reciprocity on the part of Agamemnon, paramount chief of the combined Greek army at Troy. First, he refuses to accept the generous gifts offered by Chryses, a priest

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13. To M. I. Finley, again, goes the early credit for recognizing Homeric society as a gift-society: (1978) 61-62, 64-66, 95-98, 117-18, 120-23; see also (1955). While at Columbia University, Finley was greatly influenced by the theory of K. Polanyi (based on the work of earlier economic anthropologists like B. Malinowski, M. Mauss, R. Thurnwald) that in pre-market societies all economic transactions and relations are “embedded” in the total society. Thus, what appears to modern eyes to be “economic” behavior (like exchange and distribution) is motivated by concerns of a noneconomic nature. For an account of Polanyi and his effect on the sociology of exchange and reciprocity in general, and on Finley’s ideas in particular, see Humphreys (1969). On how gifts calibrate relative social ranking, see Donlan (1989b) 3-4, 6.

of Apollo, as ransom for his daughter, who had been captured in a raid and awarded as a prize to the chief. Even though the Achaeans shout for him to respect the holy man and give back the woman, he sends Chryses away with harsh threats. It is a terrible and stupid mistake, the first of many, for Apollo immediately avenges the insult by sending a plague on the Achaeans (1.12-52). Then, to compensate himself for the loss of Chryses’ daughter, whom he now must give back, he threatens to take Achilles’ spear-prize, Briseis, as compensation (1.116-87). To seize a prize of honor, a geras, is an almost unthinkable insult, an act of “negative reciprocity,” as Marshall Sahlins would term it, equivalent to raid or plunder against an enemy.15 The dishonor is greatly compounded by the fact that this geras is a woman Achilles regards as his wife (9.335-43). The mere suggestion (1.135-39) enrages Achilles, who counterattacks by verbally assaulting the paramount. The Quarrel is on.

Before we proceed further, we need to digress briefly on the subject of insult, which is intimately bound up in the nexus of honor, status and gift in Homeric society. Insulting words and deeds are the commonest causes of feuds in “shame” cultures, where everything pivots on personal and family honor. Insult situations among high-status warriors, who are particularly touchy about their time, pose a direct danger to social stability, and must be defused as quickly as possible.16 Normally, a potential neikos is headed off either by the rapid intervention of a third party or by a gentle word from the insulter. For example, in Iliad 4 Agamemnon accuses Odysseus of shrinking from battle, provoking from him a sharp, angry response. Agamemnon responds with a smile and an apology, promising that “we will make amends afterward if any bad thing has been spoken now,” using the verb areskō, a word used almost exclusively in Homer for amends in insult situations.17

The poems give us two detailed examples of amicable resolution of a potential quarrel. In the Phaeacian games in Odyssey 8, Odysseus is verbally insulted by Euryalus (Od. 8.158-253); and in the Funeral Games in Iliad 23 Antilochus commits insult by cheating Menelaus in the chariot race (Il. 23.566-611). In both

15. Sahlins elaborated and refined Polanyi’s posited forms or patterns of economic integration — reciprocity, redistribution and exchange — into a scheme of reciprocity and redistribution closely linked to an underlying set of social relations: (1968) 82-86; (1972) 193-96. Sahlins’ reciprocal transactions occupy a continuum from “generalized reciprocity,” i.e., altruistic or “pure” giving, through “balanced reciprocity,” where the giver expects an equal or equivalent return, to “negative reciprocity,” in which each participant tries to maximize his profit at the other’s expense. This last type normatively occurs outside the group or community, among strangers or enemies. See Humphries (1969) 177, 205-06. For an analysis of the types and forms of giving and exchanging in Homer, see Donlan (1982b). It turns out, not unexpectedly, that the quid pro quo of balanced reciprocity dominates within Homeric society.

16. There exist, therefore, standard mechanisms for accepting compensatory gifts as requital for serious things like murder and adultery: e.g., Il. 9.632-36; 18.497-508; Od. 8.332. Personal quarrels not defused can easily escalate into bloodshed. If this is not satisfied by compensation, the inevitable result is either feuds or the exile of the murderer. Il. 9.447-84; 13.602-3; 15.710-76; 23.83-90; 24.480-82; Od. 14.379-81; 15.222-25, 272-76; 24.430-37. Cf. Il. 13.659; 14.482-85; 21.26-28. Odysseus the “Cretan,” is somewhat analogous circumstances to the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, responded to the Cretan chief’s demand that he give back his war-booty by killing the chief’s son in an ambush and fleeing into exile (Od. 13.258-75).

17. Il. 4.338-63. At Il. 23.473-98, Aias son of Oileus and Idomeneus start a neikos which is quickly nipped in the bud by the mediation of Achilles, Cf. Od. 11.543-67, where Odysseus tries to apologize “with soothing words” to the ghost of Aias son of Telamon for unfairly winning the contest for the arms of Achilles.
instances, the insult to honor arouses angry indignation, leading to a public apology and offer of a compensatory gift (dōron). The victim good-naturedly accepts the gift and adds a conciliating speech of his own. All seems calculated for an immediate end of the quarrel, with maximum face-saving on both sides. In these situations, the rituals of apology and gift function not only to restore peace but also publicly to affirm or decide status. The young Euryalus offers to “make amends” (aressomai) to Odysseus “with words and a gift.” His gift (dōron) of a fancy sword and scabbard symbolically calls back his insult that Odysseus looked like a merchant, not an athlete, and confers upon the still anonymous stranger his proper status as a warrior (Od. 8.396-415).

The situation in the Iliad is more complicated. Accused by Menelaus of “shaming my aretē,” for cheating him out of second place in the chariot race, Antilochus readily apologizes to the older and higher-ranking man, and offers to give him the prize and “some other better thing from my house.” Appeased by the apology and show of respect, Menelaus ends by letting Antilochus keep the prize mare “in order that these men here may know that my spirit is never arrogant and unbending” (23.566-613). By his gracious gesture Menelaus is shown to be big-hearted and generous, as befits a high chief. Antilochus, as the gift-receiver, is now even more firmly indebted to Menelaus and his cause.

We note that Menelaus’ first angry impulse is to let the “leaders and councillors” decide who was right, but that he hesitates lest a judgement in his favor might later be construed as biased, because he was superior in rank and power. His second thought, to make Antilochus swear before the assembled army that he had not cheated, thereby putting the burden on Antilochus’ personal honor, removes the possibility of bad blood between their two close and powerful houses; and Antilochus’ immediate apology and Menelaus’ benevolence close the incident in perfect balance. Like everything that happens in this book of reconciliation, the race episode symbolizes harmonious restoration of the correct social order: the headstrong young man chastized, the basileus’ honor kept safe and magnified.

The deference to age and rank displayed by Antilochus becomes all the more interesting when we consider that, just before Menelaus’ challenge, the youth vowed he would fight any man that tried to take the mare from him—having in mind Eumelus, an age-mate, to whom Achilles was going to give the second-place prize, even though he had come in last, as a consolation for a mishap that cost him the race (23.536-54). In other words, Antilochus was willing to provoke a violent neikos with a status-equal, but readily yielded to a superior; quarrels can take place only between social equals—or those who claim to be equals. 18

Antilochus’ anger is directed also at Achilles, whom he accuses of “taking away” his prize, a clear echo of the Quarrel in Book 1, but now with Achilles in the position of Agamemnon and the hotheaded Antilochus as Achilles! Here,

18. Unlike Odysseus, when the youthful Diomedes is insulted by Agamemnon as a shirker in battle, he meekly accepts the undeserved reprimand in deference to the chief’s rank (II. 4.368-418). Thersites starts a neikos with Agamemnon, which of course could not be allowed to continue.
though, Achilles smiles, lets Antilochus keep the mare, and gives Eumelus another valuable prize (23.543-65). In these scenes the poet shows, and the audience sees, ideal resolution of insults, challenges and quarrels, achieved through a distribution of gifts and words that enlarges the *tîme* of all four men.¹⁹

We return now to the insult and quarrel of Book 1. From the beginning, the insult situation between Agamemnon and Achilles, heavily freighted with status ambiguity, unfolds in a manner that is the exact negative image of these properly managed incidents. Nestor, the revered elder among the chiefs, tries to mediate, pleading with Agamemnon not to take away Achilles’ woman and with Achilles not to wrangle with a superior in rank, and with both to let go their anger (1.275-84). This was the prescribed procedure. Had Agamemnon, as initiator of the quarrel, taken back his threat with a gentle speech, Achilles would have had no choice but to retract his angry insults. But of course, by this point in the *neikos*, they had already dealt each other’s pride too much damage for any such quick and friendly solution. Their bloodless duel has become established in the audience’s mind as the machine that will drive the dramatic action of the poem. Their—our—interpretation of character, motive and behavior will be conditioned by the poet’s representation of the *agon*, which will continue until the end of Book 23.

Agamemnon, in the space of 300 lines, has committed three highly irregular acts, censured by everyone: mistreatment of a suppliant, compounded by impiety towards the god; gross insult against the leading Achaean warrior; refusal to compromise as established custom demands. These blunders reveal the Agamemnon of this poem as seriously deficient in leadership (his actions greatly harm the community of warriors), and as willfully inept at playing the important game of give and take. Most of all, he has shown himself to be greedy and ungenerous, a most serious defect in a gift-based society, where generosity is the “essence of goodness,” as Bronislaw Malinowski phrased it, and the primary requirement, next to fighting ability, for rulership.²⁰ The poet presses this theme throughout Book 1. In his verbal attack on Agamemnon, Achilles calls him “most gain-loving of all men,” “clothed in shamelessness, profit-minded,” and swears that he will not stay in Troy “dishonored (*atimos*) to pile up your riches and wealth” (1.122, 149, 171; cf. 9.330-36).

The poet reintroduces and strengthens this theme in Book 2 when he has Thersites, the only non-elite warrior given a role in the *Iliad*, use the same charges of greed and ungenerosity against Agamemnon as the grounds for his call for a general revolt (2.225-42). The political subtext of both Achilles’ and Thersites’ speeches (the one the best, the other the worst of the Achaeans) is that Agamemnon is unfit to lead. Thersites ends his tirade with the flat condemnation: “It is not right for one who is leader (*archos*) to bring the sons of the Achaean

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¹⁹. On the “juridical” aspects of these scenes, see Finley (1978) 108-10. Note the political astuteness of Achilles in giving the unclaimed fifth prize to Nestor, father of Antilochus.

²⁰. In the Trobriand Islands, “The main symptom of being powerful is to be wealthy, and of wealth to be generous. Meanness, indeed, is the most despised vice, and the only thing about which the natives have strong moral views, while generosity is the essence of goodness” Malinowski (1922) 97. On this principle in Homeric society, see Donlan (1982a), also (1982b) 156-57, 163-71.
into evils... let us sail home with our ships and leave him here in Troy to digest his geras” (2.233-37). On his side, Achilles had capped his abuse of Agamemnon with the most damning insult of all, dēmōboros basileus, a chief so gluttonous that he “eats the people” (1.231).

It is Athena, however, who explicitly defines the nature of their contest. When, in his fury, Achilles reaches for his sword to wipe out the insult, the goddess intervenes to transform the sword duel into a duel of gifts. Standing beside him, invisible to the rest, she says to Achilles:

For thus will I speak out, and this will be its conclusion.
One day three times as many splendid gifts (aglaa dōra)
will come to you because of this outrage (hubris). (1.212-14)

By this early point in the story (Book 1, line 214), enough clues have been given to establish for an audience both how the struggle for timē will be played out and who the winner will be. They are familiar with the spectacle of “fighting with property,” as it has been called—a bloodless, hence socially safe, form of warfare—and will be on the alert for further developments.21

Because of the withdrawal of Achilles and the other Myrmidon leaders and warriors, the siege goes badly for the Achaeans. In Book 9, that is about fifteen days after the quarrel, the council of allied chiefs politely but firmly insists that Agamemnon make peace with Achilles. After lecturing Agamemnon for committing insult in the first place, Nestor repeats the customary formula for resolution of insult:

But still, even now, let us consider how we may make amends (aresamenoi) and persuade him with soothing gifts and gentle words. (9.111-13)

Agamemnon had earlier confessed his grievous mistake, his atē (2.375-78), and he does so again here, saying, “I wish to make amends and give back boundless recompense” (9.115-20). What is required by custom, let us be clear, is for him to return Briseis with a public apology and a fitting compensatory gift. Instead, what follows is a gift-attack against Achilles.

Agamemnon reels off the gifts he is offering. Along with Briseis, untouched by him, he swears, will go seven bronze tripods, ten talents of gold, twenty cauldrons, twelve prize-winning horses and seven women—the largest single gift offer in either epic. All this immediately; later, when Troy is taken and the booty divided, Achilles will have his ship full of gold and bronze; and, finally, his pick of Agamemnon’s daughters to wife, without having to give the customary bride-gifts (hedna), but with gifts to him, “such as no man ever gave along with his daughter,” and rule over seven rich settlements on the fringes of his chiefdom, whose inhabitants “will honor him like a god with gifts” (9.121-56).

This is a spectacular gesture, and the audience is supposed to see it as such. In one swoop, Agamemnon shakes off the accusations of greediness that have

accumulated around him and makes himself appear a paragon of chiefly generosity. The council of elders (gerontes) is impressed. Nestor says, “the gifts you offer lord Achilles are no longer to be despised” (163-64); and the audience members, putting themselves in the elders’ place, might well have agreed that this satisfactorily balanced the ledger, especially since Achilles owed the obligations of comradeship to his fellow warriors who were being hard pressed in battle.

But at the same time, the listeners could not have failed to notice two things about the offer that made it less benign than it seemed: first and foremost, the glaringly obvious omission of the indispensable element, a public apology. The embassy is a strictly private affair—from Agamemnon’s camp hut to Achilles’—and yet even in this private setting no “gentle words” of apology are reported from the absent offender. Second, according to the rules of reciprocity acceptance of such fabulous treasure-gifts, far exceeding the usual compensation called for in such situations, would have put Achilles under a heavy debt of obligation, in effect turning recompense into a statement of power.

The final part of Agamemnon’s offer, to make Achilles his gambros, son-in-law, and put him in charge of seven prosperous villages, has seemed to most critics a crowning act of generous compensation. Yet here again, audiences will have recognized a standard epic and mythic motif, adoption by marriage into the household of a powerful chief, a form of marrying-up, typically reserved for wandering adventurers and impecunious suitors. We may think of Odysseus in his guise as a man from Crete, who, though poor and landless, had managed through his aretē to marry the daughter of a rich man (Od. 14.199-213); or of Othryoneus of Cabesus who, too poor to pay the marriage hedna, offered Priam war-service in return for his daughter’s hand. He was killed before he could collect his reward, prompting Idomeneus to make a cruel joke about such marriage arrangements as he drags the young man’s corpse into the Achaean lines (ll. 13.363-82).

James Redfield is surely right in saying, “by his very act of recompense Agamemnon asserts his authority over Achilles,” and by the “offered terms of settlement Agamemnon would convert Achilles into his dependent . . . Achilles knows he is being asked to submit.” From Achilles’ point of view, the offer to make him a service-groom, under the control of his father-in-law, would have

22. Achilles never mentions the omission directly, although he does say that Agamemnon, “though shameless as a dog, would not dare to look me in the face” (9:372-73); and at 16.72-73 he tells Patroclus he would now be fighting “if powerful Agamemnon were gentle-minded towards me.” See Whitman (1958) 193. Martin (1989) 97 classifies the gift-offer as an abuse of speech. “Agamemnon’s gifts alone should not persuade Achilles, because he does not accompany them (despite Nestor’s warning) with the proper style, of ‘gentle words’ . . . .” Martin notes a further insult; the poet allows Nestor to send Odysseus, Achilles’ traditional enemy, as a mouthpiece for Agamemnon.

23. “And we too would promise and fulfill these things and would give you the best in looks of the daughters of the son of Atreus . . . if you will sack with us the well-peopled citadel of Ilos . . . since we are honest marriage-brokers” (377-72). Cf. ll. 6.191-93 (Bellerophon); 14.119-24 (Tydeus); Od. 7.311-15 (Odysseus).

24. Redfield (1975) 15-16, 105. The gifts are viewed by most commentators as either contributing positively to Achilles’ time, thus exculpating Agamemnon, or else negatively as bribes, thus partially excusing Achilles by placing some burden of blame on the chief. Wilcock (1978), at 9.121-56, is typical: “The magnificence of the reparations is a measure of Achilles’ honour. He has been insulted, but if he accepts . . . his status will be higher than before the insult.” Cf. Griffin (1980) 99: “The presents are marks of honour (not merely a bribe).” Whitman
appeared as a continuation of the insult; far from honoring him, it formally defines him as inferior in status. This explains his remark to Ajax that Agamemnon has treated him "as if I were some rightless migrant (atimétos metanastês)" (9.648; cf.16.59).

Achilles’ immediate reaction to Odysseus’ relaying of the offer indicates his awareness: “Hateful to me as the gates of Hades the man who hides one thing in his heart and says another” (9.312-13). This may obliquely include Odysseus himself, although there is nothing deceptive in his perfectly straightforward speech; he is merely the conveyer of the duplicitous offer, which appears friendly but is really hostile. Agamemnon’s "audience," the envoys, understood the situation, of course; that is why they now base their appeal solely on Achilles’ obligations to his comrades.25

The audience shares the narrator’s omniscience here. In this episode, perhaps better than anywhere else in the epic, we can see his method at work; for it is not at all subtle. To make perfectly clear what Agamemnon’s motive is, the poet has him say at the end of his catalogue of gifts, “and let him submit to me, inasmuch as I am a greater chief (basileuteros) and inasmuch as I say myself to be the elder in birth” (9.160-61). Homer has Odysseus repeat the long gift list (thirty-six lines) word for word to Achilles, but substitute for Agamemnon’s insulting conclusion the instrumental Achaean argument:

But if the son of Atreus has become more hated in your heart, himself and his gifts, at least take pity on the rest of the Pan-Achaeans, worn out amidst the host, who will honor you like a god. For truly you would win very great glory (kudos) from them." (9.300-03)

Here the audience knows what the narrator knows and Achilles does not. But the poet presents Achilles as being aware that Odysseus has left out the revealing coda. Presented with such broad clues as these, painted with such plain, bold strokes, contemporary audiences could hardly have missed the poet’s intended meaning. Achilles, the embodiment of heroic honor, has no other choice but to refuse, even though this brands him, unwillingly, as a betrayer of philotês.

Much has been made of the fact that Achilles questions the heroic ideal of timeî won by reckless risk of life in battle. It is a brilliant stroke of characterization to have the ideal warrior hero weigh life against booty and posthumous glory and judge in favor of life. The question, which we may be sure many in the audience had pondered to themselves and with others, is perfectly placed in Achilles, for whom alone among epic figures a choice was possible. But his reflections on this

(1958) 192-93 comes closer to seeing the offer itself as an insult. “[Agamemnon] still must have submission from Achilles, even if he has to buy it.” Where these observations fail is in a lack of understanding of the sociological “language” of gifts. Excessive gifts do not “bribe” (an essentially modern notion); they create a heavy obligation, which translates into a superior-inferior status relationship.

25. At 9.344-45, 369-76. Achilles specifically accuses Agamemnon of trickery and deceit (verbs apatao, exapatao). Richardson (1990) 64 notes that in the narration of the history of Agamemnon’s skêptron (2.100-08), the symbol of his authority as a basileus, the four figures who take possession of it from Zeus to Agamemnon (Hermes, Pelops, Atreus and Thyestes) are associated with trickery and deception.
topos and his complaints about the present political system's failure to distribute time according to merit in no way constitute a denial of his society's values. Throughout the great rejection speech Achilles adheres unswervingly to the core value, revenge for shame, now immensely deepened by the dishonoring offer and by the other chiefs' complicity in it. That his devotion to the honor-shame principle forces him to negate the other imperative of the warrior's ethic, to aid his fellow warriors, is a lamentable, but inevitable consequence of the universally accepted standards of "heroic" behavior.

The interpretation that in having Achilles spurn Agamemnon's gifts the poet holds him guilty of a sin or moral error, caused by a fundamental defect of character, which leads to his punishment later, is sociologically untenable. These are notions based on the ideals of Christian chivalry, not on the demands of an archaic rank society.26 A quick temper and touchy pride, implacable hatred of one's enemy, fierce resentment at lack of support from philoi and hetairoi, all of which are at work here, are normal and proper behaviors of a warrior.27 In fact, it is more correct to say that Achilles' willingness to compromise his honor caused his personal tragedy. His first impulse was to go home to his uncouth Thessalian chiefdom to marry, a point he stresses, a local girl picked out by his father Peleus, and live out a long, though fameless life (9.393-416). It is the pull of his obligations to the community of warriors, expressed variously by the chorus of Odysseus, Phoenix and Ajax, that decides him to stay in Troy, and on the very next day to send Patroclus into the battle as his surrogate (16.60-65).

Let us briefly recapitulate. Whether they agree with the ambassadors or with Achilles in the excruciating personal dilemma fashioned for him by the poet, the audience understands that Achilles has been presented by an offer he must refuse—not, as Cedric Whitman maintains, because Achilles holds to some special "half-realized, inward conception of honor," but simply because Agamemnon has now grossly compounded the original insult.28 They recognize Agamemnon's tactic—typically wily and typically clumsy (we think of the fiasco of the Dream and Test in Book 2, the very essence of atē)—as yet another act of hubris. They know that this is just another bout in an ongoing contest over honor and status, expressed in the symbolic language of the gift. They understand

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26. The Christian moralistic viewpoint was expressed in extreme form by earlier critics: e.g., Bowers (1930): Achilles' "temper" leads him "to disaster and moral degradation"; he has "fallen from heroic standards of virtue" (17); his "wrath is wicked" (18); he has "set himself up against the divine law, and he must expect the consequences" (20); his "character ... is the cause of all that happens" (193). Most revealing: "Roland would never have acted, as Achilles acted, from injured pride: that was more the part of Ganelon" (194). Recent critics tone down the rhetoric of sinning, but keep the substance; for Griffin (1980) 74, note 46, Achilles' "passionate emotion" causes him to "override" the heroic code which dictated return to battle as the "appropriate action." Mueller (1984) 46-47 speaks of Achilles' "vindicative intransigence," and his "blind intransigence," which "compounds the initial error.

27. See the perceptive remarks of Edwards (1987) 232-37. What is problematic is the "success" standard itself. The tension between the self- and family-centered individual and the well-being of the whole community was a persistent structural problem in the pre-polis society (and well beyond), and for that reason is played out and over again in epic poetry, most searchingly in the Quarrel, but also in the case of Hector and Troy and in the relationship between Odysseus and his hetairoi in the Odyssey. See in general Adkins (1960).

28. Whitman (1958) 190. It is excessively "modern," in my opinion, to characterize the Quarrel as merely the "impetus which drove Achilles from the simple assumptions of the other princely heroes onto the path where heroism means the search for the dignity and meaning of the self" (193; cf. 197). Compare A. Parry (1956) 5-6: in his rejection speech, Achilles is searching for some way to express his intuitive sense of the "awful distance between appearance and reality." I emphasize again that the listeners would have had a less complicated psychological reaction. A good corrective is Claus (1975).
that, under the rules of social competition, Achilles’ *cholos*, his anger, can now be assuaged only by diminution of Agamemnon’s *timê*:

Not if he gave me gifts as many as there is sand and dust, not even so will Agamemnon yet persuade my spirit until he has given back to me the whole [price of the] spirit-stinging insult. (9.385-87)

And they are aware as well that by scorning the offer, that is, by foiling Agamemnon’s attempt to reduce him to a formal dependent, Achilles has scored a win over his opponent. In being refused, Agamemnon has lost much face.

The Quarrel ends in Book 19, a day and a night after the Embassy. Events have made the choice; Achilles must now reenter the battle to get revenge on Hector and the Trojans for the death of Patroclus. Still, there has to be a formal ceremony of reconciliation before he can rejoin the army. It is not, however, a true reconciliation. The formal proceedings, drawn out for 220 lines (19.56-275), bristle with the same competitive tension of their direct confrontation in Book 1 and their indirect battle in 9. Custom requires, we remember, a public apology from the offender, renunciation of anger by the injured party, public presentation of the compensatory gift, and its acceptance by the victim; all signifying, according to convention, that the former status relationship between the parties has been restored. Each ritual is in fact observed, but the poet’s manipulation of the standard elements shows that this is really a continuation of their duel with gifts. Once again, Agamemnon suffers loss of *timê*.

As in Book 1, Achilles takes the initiative, summoning an assembly of all the Greeks. Even the noncombatants, who generally do not attend the *agorê*, come to see and hear. In a short, crisp speech (“a few frigid words” is how Redfield characterizes it ([1975]107), Achilles formally renounces his *cholos*, expressing regret that so many have died, “while I was raging in anger” (verb *apomêniô*). Let us put this strife in the past, he says, “even though it hurts us, beating down the spirit of anger in our breasts, because we must” (19.61-68). The last third of his brief eighteen-line speech is an order to Agamemnon to summon the army quickly to battle (68-73). He is firm, polite, businesslike, and impersonal.

Agamemnon’s rambling apology, three and a half times the length of Achilles’ speech, true to his character in this poem, is self-serving and oblique (19.78-144):

> Often the Achaeans spoke this word to me and found fault with me; but I am not to blame, but Zeus and Moira and Erinys who walks in mist. . . . (85-87)\(^9\)

Agamemnon’s shift of blame onto Atê, that external force which clouds a man’s sense of right and makes him err against his will, is in pitiable contrast to Achilles’ matter-of-fact acknowledgement that it was his wrath, *mênis*, that sent so many Achaeans to their deaths. However grudgingly, Agamemnon *does* get

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\(^9\) See Edwards (1991) 244 on the “ungracious and jealous, not humble or apologetic” tone of the speech, and Agamemnon’s obvious “uneasiness and resentment towards Achilleus.”
out the formula: “But since I was blinded (aasamên) and Zeus took away my wits from me, I wish to make amends and give back boundless recompense.” He ends his speech with a request that Achilles hold off from battle until the gifts are brought out, “so that you may see that I will give you them in satisfying abundance” (144). Thus far, the ceremony, although strained, has been proper.

At this point, however, the situation turns into an almost farcical parody of normal procedures. Achilles replies that Agamemnon may give or keep the dôra, as he wishes, but that they should stop wasting time and get on with the battle immediately. Odysseus (who else?) now intervenes, urging that the army have breakfast before fighting; but first off, he says, “let the lord of men Agamemnon bring the gifts into the midst of the assembly, so that all the Achaeans may see them with their eyes and that you may be warmed in your heart,” adding that he, Achilles, should now be mollified, and politely rebukes Agamemnon for initiating the quarrel (172-83). Agamemnon immediately agrees, saying:

Let Achilles remain here the while, eager though he is for Ares, and you, all the rest, stay assembled here until the gifts come from my hut and we swear our oaths with a sacrifice. (188-91)

Achilles again protests the delay; Odysseus insists once more, and finally Briseis and the promised gifts are ceremoniously paraded out and displayed “in the midst of the agore,” while a boar is sacrificed as Agamemnon solemnly swears he has not laid a hand on Briseis (199-268).

The significance of this bizarre tug-of-war is not lost on the listeners, who realize that the public display of the fabulous gifts is an essential part of Agamemnon’s competitive strategy. This small triumph is his only victory, and he has had to maneuver hard to achieve it. But Achilles does not let him have even this. In place of the customary friendly acknowledgement of the apology and gifts, he delivers, in the form of a prayer to Zeus, a mocking five-line paraphrase of Agamemnon’s long dissertation on Ate, and dismisses the assembly, while the Myrmidons collect the gifts and carry them to his ship (270-81).32

Let us back up a bit in time. During the embassy to persuade Achilles to accept the gifts in Book 9, Phoenix, his old tutor, told the story of Meleager who, nursing his cholos like Achilles, did not come out to save his village until the last minute,
and so did not get the gifts he had been offered (9.529-605). Phoenix had warned Achilles then that “if without gifts you go into man-destroying battle, no longer will your timê be the same, even though you drive back the battle” (9.604-05). The event has contradicted the prediction of Phoenix, and Athena’s prophecy of Book 1, that three times as many gifts would come to Achilles because of the insult, has been fulfilled and exceeded. Achilles has taken great treasure from his rival on his own terms, and without obligation. He has not even acknowledged his acceptance of them. It is a stunning victory.

More victories follow. In Book 23 Achilles’ spectacular display of wealth and of generosity in the funeral and games for Patroclus completely eclipses Agamemnon’s public show of the gifts two days before. The funeral itself is an unparalleled holocaust of numerous sheep and cattle, two hunting dogs, four horses and twelve Trojan prisoners, all burned together with Patroclus’ corpse on the pyre (23.110-257). In the funeral games immediately following, Achilles distributes his wealth recklessly, increasing prizes and awarding them even to some who do not compete (257-897). It has been pointed out often that his actions bear an unmistakable resemblance to the “potlatch,” a lavish competitive feast common among big-man-chief societies, in which huge amounts of food and valuables are eaten, given away, and even destroyed, to show one’s superiority over one’s rivals.

As Leslie Collins has recently pointed out, the games also offer Achilles an opportunity to act as the Pan-Achaean chief, thus symbolically usurping Agamemnon’s rank. Like the paramount chief, Achilles settles disputes, determines status and allocates timê in the form of prizes. One of those to whom he gives a prize is Agamemnon, who steps up for the final contest, the spear-throw. Achilles awards him the prize cauldron without a competition, because “we know how much you surpass all others, and how much you are the best (aristos) in might and in spear-throwing” (23.890-91).

This marks the true reconciliation, for Achilles honors Agamemnon for precisely that skill that he himself excels in, the most important one. It is a gracious compliment and a fitting way to mark the end of their painful progress towards the desired amity. Yet no member of an audience attuned to the use of gifts to calibrate status could have missed the point that a prize (aethlon) to be won was converted to a free gift. The Quarrel had begun with Agamemnon churlishly taking away a gift; it ends with Achilles generously bestowing one. Agamemnon leaves the poem under obligation to Achilles.

The interpretation I have advanced, namely that the poet deliberately framed the Quarrel as a duel with gifts, is justified by the fact that the literary situation is precisely about gifts and display, and because we know—from elsewhere in the texts, from later Greek history, and from comparative sociology—that these

33. Collins (1988) 102; cf. 99-100. And, of course, Achilles becomes the de facto leader of the army in Book 20, since Agamemnon is wounded and cannot fight. We may add that Patroclus’ magnificent funeral, which is symbolically Achilles’ own, is attended not only by the Myrmidons, but also by the entire Achaean army, making it like the funeral of a paramount basileus.
things had enormous social significance in the Dark Age and Archaic period. We can state this another way. In terms of plot, a physical duel between Achilles and Agamemnon was prohibited, obviously, leaving competitive gift-giving as the only other way of representing the titanic struggle between the rivals.

Significant real-life social situations, like insult and competitive gift-giving, are natural themes of traditional poetry, which uses these behavior-revealing occasions to delineate and develop character and motivation. Audiences bring to these fictional situations their collective normative judgements of how people ought to behave in such circumstances and their collective understanding of the conventional poetic handling of these themes and motifs. So, for example, according to the storyteller's symbolic shorthand, the suitors in the Odyssey, because they corrupt the important social institutions of feasting and hospitality, are automatically to be recognized as evil and therefore deserving of slaughter.

In the Iliad, every twist of the theme of “fighting with property” provides a running commentary on the character and behavior of the rivals. To the collaborating spectators of the agón, who are expertly alert to the signals, the meaning of the interactions between the antagonists is clear. Agamemnon has consistently violated the norms of reciprocity and botched every attempt to outmaneuver Achilles in display and giving. Achilles has played the game flawlessly at every turn, diminishing his rival’s timē and increasing his own. Achilles, who is indisputably superior to Agamemnon (and to every one else) in warcraft, is revealed as superior to him also in respect to a leader’s other ideal quality of princely generosity. Remember, too, that it is through the device of Achilles’ magnificent refusal of gifts that the poet proves to us his pure adherence to the warrior’s fundamental principle, to defend and increase his honor. In that sense, Achilles, often regarded by modern critics as the outsider, the man on the margin of the social order, is revealed as the true insider, the strictest upholder of the traditional heroic code.34

There is one final point to make. The duel with gifts serves a deeper artistic purpose. Achilles’ most triumphant moments come after he has set aside his obsession with honor and status. His astonishing aristeia (20.156-22.394), which in ferocity and brutal efficiency far outshines the battle exploits of all the other heroes combined and brings him his heart’s desire of kleos and kudos (fame and glory), is joyless and meaningless to him, except as revenge. At the moment of his ultimate achievement as a warrior, he is wearily disillusioned with the whole business.35 Like his aristeia his public victories over Agamemnon, the full vindication of his honor, and his symbolic assumption of the ruler’s authority are merely the accidents of his grief, unsought and unimportant.

The point of Achilles’ unintentional competition for timē in Books 19 and 23, like his unintended return to battle, is ironical. Achilles’ strange destiny is to be

34. Cf. Redfield (1975) 105. We may note, too, that in refusing the gifts Achilles earned greater kleos than if he had accepted, as he himself says at 19.63-64: “But the Achaeans, I think, will long remember the strife (eris) between you and me.”
trapped in his ideal-hero image, unable to quit a role he has long questioned and finally repudiated altogether. The duel with gifts functions as the poet’s own critical evaluation of the heroic ethos, as he marks out distinctly for the listeners the successive stages of the main hero’s perplexity and disillusionment, and his growing awareness and insight. It prepares us for the sublime finale of the *Iliad*, the ransom of Hector’s corpse, which tells of a final giving of gifts, a final and symbolically all-embracing resolution of quarrels and renouncing of anger (24.469-688).\(^36\)

**Let me summarize** briefly the two closely connected propositions I have set forth. First, I have tried to show that an “anthropology of Homer” is possible. Enough information is now available to reconstruct, not completely, yet adequately, the material and mental realities that made up the common sociological background of poets and audiences. Second, I have argued that since an oral poem exists only as an interaction between singer and listeners, their collective field of expectations is crucial to the process of poetic production. Yet, perhaps because the social basis of that co-creative process has seemed so inaccessible, audience reception has been the least privileged element of Homeric criticism.

That is easy to understand. Already by the early seventh century B.C., the social institutions and values of the ninth- and eighth-century chiefdoms had been radically transformed. By the fifth century, the economy had become “disembedded” almost completely, and exchange and distribution bore only faint traces of the gift-reciprocity that had structured social relations among the pre-polis ancestors. Because of the near total distance from that experience, the working assumption of literary criticism from Hellenistic times on has been that “we”—the reading audience of the moment—are the intended audience, leaving us free to construct our own anachronistic sociologies of Homer, thereby validating interpretations of the poem’s aims according to our own cultural preconceptions.

Without a social context we paradoxically ignore a fundamental fact of oral poetry, its embeddedness in the contemporary experience. If I am right about the Great Quarrel, Homer (and his tradition) gave heroic dimension to what was commonplace and recurring in the lives of the Dark Age villagers, yet of extreme interest and importance to them, the insults, quarrels and competitions among the chiefs of the *demos*. It cannot be otherwise that the more we understand about how these and other primary sociocultural concerns actually worked in the real world, the keener our literary-critical vision will become.\(^37\)

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36. The ransoming of Hector’s body provides one final twist in the game of gift-giving and -taking. Despite his stubborn refusal to give back Hector, Achilles gets great treasure gifts in the end (24.229-35). Agamemnon’s refusal to let go Chryseis in Book 1 had cost him the “countless ransom” and a payment to Apollo of a hecatomb of bulls and goats.

37. This paper is based on my 1991 lecture as the John and Helen Condon Symposiast at Loyola University of Chicago. I wish to express again my thanks to the Classical community at Loyola for their *philia*. I am also indebted to Professor Ann Batchelder, whose as yet unpublished paper, “Achilles and Agamemnon: Two Models of Kingship in the *Iliad*,” has provided fresh insights into the events of Books 1, 9, 19, and 23.