
The Subduing Of Mass Consciousness In The Iliad

“Nation of swarming insects” (2.87): The Subduing of Mass Consciousness in The Iliad

The warriors of Homer’s Iliad strive to ascertain posthumous glory, yet the majority of individuals involved in the main conflict seemingly lack personal sentience as they remain anonymous and unconscious to the power of those who exhibit individuality - those who actively rise from the masses to exemplify autonomy. Illustrating conformity to naturalistic impulses by likening the Achaian forces to swarms of bees as well as through comparison between Thersites’ cry for mutiny, Homer establishes the decisive need for individuality and selfhood within the hero, for only those who wield the power of the gods - or diverge from their divinely overwhelming authority - can execute agency within the conflict of The Iliad.

A necessary sense of banality governs the condition of the warrior in Homer’s epic in so far as, instead of being granted autonomy, the consciousness of the soldiers is diminished to a kind of uniformed mindlessness that renders the attainment of glory impossible. In a simile in Book II, Homer introduces the legions of Achaian soldiers as being “[l]ike the swarms of clustering bees” (2.87) who categorically lack individuality (as inferred from the comparison to the hive mind species). Likewise, Homer further pacifies the actions of individuals by presenting them as hanging “like / bunched grapes as they hover beneath the flowers in springtime” (2.88-89), noting the incessant nature of their condition as they “issue forever / in fresh bursts from the hollow stone” (2.87-88). Thus, compounded and reduced to a lesser aggregate condition, the warriors lose individuality and thus their fate is predetermined. While heroes of the epic exhibit the perceived ability to challenge fate or, at least, to acknowledge the divine forces that give rise to immutable destiny, the warrior “bees” act without agency as they move “this way and that way” (2.90), unaware of both the motivations and consequences of their actions. Even when Homer concedes collective action as “the people” take “their positions” (2.96), it is made clear that the human action among the masses provokes natural discontent with the “earth groaning” (2.95) in retort. If the subdued individuality of the common warrior serves to complement the divinely ordered world, then only those who wield divine power over nature are granted a heroic likeness. Even so, this parallels some kind of variant on the Euthyphro dilemma: are the heroes great because the gods choose them or do the gods choose the heroes because they are great?

Likewise, the presentation of “Powerful Agamemnon” (2.100) in the poem constructs a notable dichotomy that allows for the discussion of the origins of power and its respective worth. Perhaps the most obvious emblem of the king’s divergence from his hive is his material sceptre which “Hephaistos had wrought him carefully” (2.101). Homer immediately details the celestial history of this sceptre rather than a story of Agamemnon’s might (2.102-08), for the fact that ownership of the entity can be traced all the way to Zeus grants authority to Agamemnon beyond what his individual actions could have expressed. Indeed, the sceptre was left for the great king “to carry / and to be lord of many islands and over all Argos” (2.107-08). Furthermore, Agamemnon - when first addressing his swarm - leans “upon this sceptre” (2.109) to gain the divine power of *logos*, physically relying upon a symbol of regalia and thus of monarchal heritage. Yet, as Agamemnon speaks over the nonsensical murmurs of Achaian warriors, he achieves individuality only through a divergence from the naturalistic simile that

constricted the consciousness of his society. Nevertheless, it is ironic that when Thersites is chastised by Odysseus the latter wields Agamemnon's sceptre and "dashes" (2.265) it against Thersites' back, thus symbolically assuming a seemingly transactional leadership which in turn justifies many of Thersites' claims about Agamemnon's poor leadership. Even Odysseus does not question the validity of Thersites' assertions but instead challenges his intrinsic status and thus individuality: "there is no worse man than you are" (2.259). In emphasising "who is speaking and not what is being said", Homer demonstrates the ways in which the consciousness of a regular soldier is subdued.

Moreover, as Schreiber-Stainthorp elucidates, "that Thersites is the only common soldier to be given a significant amount of space in the epic" explains why Homer can justifiably exclude lowly figures from any deep characterisation in the rest of the poem. Interestingly, this could suggest that, although Thersites' occupation determines that he would typically fall into the aforementioned category of the "clustering bees" (2.87), his consciousness is not subdued due to his blatant rejections of mindless heteronomy. Even so, the fact that Thersites does not reappear suggests that his outburst subverts the contemporary themis. Indeed, the narrator makes it extremely obvious that Thersites is not to be liked, an observation emphasised through the notable lack of epithets used in descriptions of him. Bearing connotations of respect, epithets are used elsewhere to describe Agamemnon as "the shepherd of the people" (2.244) which is itself ironic due to the association of shepherds and good leadership. In addition, Homer's description of Thersites' objections begin with a vitriolic discourse on the latter's appearance thus influencing how his opinions will be considered. Thersites is described as "the ugliest man who came beneath Ilion" (216) which is significant as the Greek term for the aristocracy - *kalloi kagathoi* - translates to the "beautiful and good". Werner Haeger effectively surmises this ideology as 'the chivalrous ideal of the complete human personality, harmonious in mind and body, foursquare in battle and speech, song and action' wherein physique is often used as a proxy for honour and consequently individuality, a catalyst for consciousness.

Nevertheless, in direct contrast to Thersites is Achilles; "Thersites satirises what Achilles epitomises". Where Thersites is beaten until he "a round tear dropped from him" (2.266) for rejecting a corrupt authority that is mindlessly accepted by the rest of the legion, Achilles is presented as righteous in Book I when he confronts an unjust Agamemnon who both characters criticise for not sharing the spoils of war and urge the soldiers to return home. Thersites even asks Agamemnon - in a similarly rhetorical opening to Achilles' speech - "what further thing do you want" (2.225). Yet the difference is that Achilles is made an individual for his splendour, not - as is the case for Thersites - his ignominy. Whilst not asserting that designating Thersites as a conventional foil is unexpected, there still remains to be asked why Homer makes Thersites so eerily like Achilles? Nevertheless, the significantly public and painful humiliation of Thersites can be concluded as having intended to squash any further move towards mutiny, essentially subduing mass consciousness.

In essence, if the majority of participants in Homer's war lacked sentience and passively engaged in the war, then the heroes of Homer's epic are those who participated actively in the unfolding of destiny. Despite perhaps falling victim to the tragedy of fate, the Homeric hero acknowledges this greater power and wields divinity—either through celestial symbols or divine intervention—in active force guided by ideals of the individualised self, not the collectivised swarm.