The Death of Thersites
and the Sympotic Performance
of Iambic Mockery

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One of the greatest frustrations confronting the student of archaic Greek poetry is
the relative paucity of evidence about performance context. It is often lamented that if
we only knew more about the conditions under which a work was performed, we would
be in a much better position to understand its poetics—not only its meaning and
function for a putatively "original" audience, but also the vicissitudes of its afterlife.
Our frustrations in this regard are particularly acute in the case of the archaic iambus—
that infamous genre of satire and personal mockery—particularly because its many
transgressive conceits (e.g., aschrologia, abusive mockery, unelated subject matter,
etc.) have always made it difficult for critics to imagine why a poet would be moved to
compose this sort of poetry in the first place, and who would want to hear it. If we knew
a little more than we do about the circumstances in which iambographers composed and
performed, and the particular relationships they expected to develop with an audience,
we would presumably be in a better position to assess contemporary cultural attitudes
towards poetic satire and mockery, as well as the generic dynamics that informed the
composition of such poetry.

I would like to discuss in this paper a few strands of evidence which, I believe,
enrich our understanding of such questions about iambographic genre and performance,
and, in particular, may shed a little more light on poetic performance at early symposia.
My discussion will focus on a mythological figure who has become particularly
associated in recent decades with the iambographic tradition, especially as he is
portrayed in Homer iliad 2. In fact, however, for reasons which I discuss below, I find
the Homeric Thersites to be rather problematic as an analogue for the iambic poet, and
will instead turn to a less well studied aspect of the Thersites myth, his appearance in
the fragmentary Aethiopis (a post-Iliadic narrative), which, I believe, can tell us a even
more about iambic performance than the Homeric passage. In the Aethiopis, the ever
cantankerous Thersites engages in his last act of mockery, prompting as it does his target, Achilles, to kill him in response. This scene, referred to since antiquity as the “Thersitoktonos,” is, as we shall see, rather poorly documented in ancient literature, but it is amply depicted on a fourth-century Apulian red-figure volute crater, which locates the fateful event at what seems to be some sort of a banquet. The scene seems to suggest, as I shall argue, the moment when something of a disconnect occurs between the mocker and his target, and by extension, between poet and audience; that is, the story portrays what happens when something goes wrong in a symposiastic setting of mockery, when cues are missed and the target mistakes blame mediated by marked language (whether marked specifically by poetic or non-poietic forms) for the discourse of unmediated intentionality.

Before examining this part of the Thersites story, a brief consideration of the Iliadic Thersites (Iliad 2.213-78) is necessary in order to see how scholars have analogized him, in his capacity as Homeric social critic and perennial jester, as an embodiment of iambic poetry. Gregory Nagy first popularized among classicists the notion of the iambus as a poetry of blame, or, to use the Greek term, the _piogos_. Nagy’s pioneering study of Thersites in his _Best of the Achaeans_ (1979) concluded that he functions as the paradigmatic blame poet, not unlike an Archilochus or Hipponax—poets conspicuously involved throughout their work in quarrels (neikê) with prominent individuals in which they employ the discourse of reproach and blame (oncidos, ekenhkos). Nagy’s most enduring contribution has been to situate Thersites convincingly within the ancient polarity of praise and blame, where everything about his behavior as a “blamer,” and even his very demeanor, places him in stark opposition to the realm of praise and “praisers.” Nagy’s careful analysis of the terminology of praise and blame found in Greek poets such as Pindar and Bacchylides (praise poets) or the iambographers (blame poets), has been crucial for our understanding of the generic forces that shaped such poetic traditions, and his notion of the _piogos_ as a type of poetry that existed as a foil to the _airos_, or praise poetry, has gone far to overcome the tendencies of earlier criticism to treat the iambos and other forms of mocking poetry as idiosyncratically autobiographical and disconnected from more mainstream generic currents within Greek poetry.

One of Nagy’s greatest insights in this regard was to realize that several characters in Homer, notably Iros in the _Odyssey_ and Thersites in the _Iliad_, are portrayed in a manner that explicitly recalls blame poetry: not only do they engage in mockery and use satirical techniques in front of a putative “audience,” but they are also described by the

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1 Nagy 1979, p. 226 (and passim Ch. 12), discusses the way in which epic “quotes the language of blame within the framework of narrating quarrels” (see also p. 43 n.), and from this point he assumes that characters using this sort of language are actually behaving themselves as “blame poets.” See also Korus 1991, p. 95-110 on the Homeric Thersites-episode as an early example of Greek “satire,” although Nagy’s work seems to have been curiously unavailable to him.

2 Nagy 1979, p. 222, credits Dumézil 1943 and Detienne 1973 with establishing a praise-blame opposition as a fundamental principle of archaic Indo-European (Dumézil) and Greek society (Detienne).
narrator (Homer) with terminology that Nagy has identified as specifically associated with the *pegeos.* His treatment of such Homeric scenes of blaming, however, raises an important methodological question, namely whether it is legitimate for us to assume that when Homer portrays characters who engage in mockery or abuse, such scenes must necessarily reflect a *poetic* tradition of "blame," and even if they do, whether the one portrayed as the blamer must always be equated with a satirist. I think, in fact, that Nagy's conception of what constituted blame poetry *per se* requires some adjustment.

It seems to me that we may really only identify a character as behaving like a satirical poet within a given narrative when that character can be said to have established the sort of *relationship* with a target and putative audience that can legitimately be associated with the actual practice of satire. In other words, just because a character may ridicule someone within a narrative, does not necessarily mean that the audience of the work in which the scene is embedded would regard this ridicule in the same light as they would the ridicule of an actual satirist in an actual performance. The act of "blaming" (mockery, ridicule, etc.) by definition involves *two* (or more) parties, but there can be only one playing the role of the *satirist* in a given context, and the criterion for identifying him as such is the level of "righteousness" he can convince an audience that he has on his side. The Iliadic Thersites, therefore, according this criteria, behaves less like the blamer than the one blamed: to use an analogy from a later period, more like the Paphlagonian than the Sausage-seller in Aristophanes' *Knights.*

By contrast, the story of Thersites' death in the *Aithiopis,* I believe, shows Thersites in a rather different light, emphasizing a side of him that looks more like what we expect of a *bona fide* satirist, i.e., one who displays an attitude of comic self-righteousness *endorsed by the narrative in which it is embedded.* The ancient anecdotes about his death at the hands of Achilles and the events that immediately follow, as we shall see, imply that at least some of the Greek army understood that when Thersites behaved as a "satirist" rather than as a true subversive, he did not deserve the sufferings that always seemed to dog him. The differences between the two Thersites stories will, in the end, confirm that ancient Greek audiences of virtually all periods were well attuned to the distinction between true satirists, who blamed according to certain generic and performance protocols, and genuine threats to social stability.

In Proclus' summary of the *Aithiopis,* which began where the *Iliad* left off (*Chrestomathia* p. 105.25-26 OCT), we find the following outline of a story about the death of Thersites:

καὶ Ἀχιλλεὺς Ἑρσίτην ἀναιρεῖ λοιδορθείς πρὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ ὀφειδοθεὶς τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ Πενθελείᾳ λεγόμενον ἔρωτα: καὶ ἐκ τούτου στάσεις γίνεται τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖς περὶ τοῦ Ἑρσίτου φόνου. μετὰ δὲ

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3 In other words, both the Paphlagonian and the Sausage-seller in *Knights* are engaged in blaming one another, but the plot of the play makes it clear that the former is the real "target" of blame, and the latter the blamer. Both engage in mutual vituperation, but only one can be considered, from the author's perspective, a "satirist," i.e., a figure whose blame is portrayed as "just."
Achilles killed Thersites after having been reviled by him and reproached for the love he allegedly felt for Penthesileia. As a result, *stasis* arose among the Achaeans over the death of Thersites. After this, Achilles sailed to Lesbos, and after making a sacrifice to Apollo, Artemis, and Leto, he was purified of the murder by Odysseus.

Evidently the *Aithiopis* opened with the famous story of the Amazonian warrior, Penthesileia, who had come to fight for the Trojans, but was killed by Achilles after fighting heroically. It seems as if a report had been circulating that Achilles had fallen in love with Penthesileia (*τὸν...λεγόμενον ἔρωτα*), and certainly later writers often assumed that he had, although it's uncertain whether the veracity of the report was confirmed or denied in the *Aithiopis*. In any case, Thersites ridicules Achilles for something that others had already been talking about, whether or not it was actually true. In itself, this depicts a situation rather different from that in *Iliad* 2, for there Thersites' opposition to Agamemnon had been cast by the narrator as a self-generated minority view, whereas in the *Aithiopis* Thersites evidently takes up the popular critical opinion on a pre-existing controversial issue of the day—the report that Achilles had fallen in love with an enemy—and repackages it as a form of comic mockery directed at the person perceived to be the main perpetrator, namely Achilles. In other words, the substance of Thersites' attacks against a superior in each narrative: in the *Iliad*, his complaint against Agamemnon threatens to upset the order of events (not to mention the *Diei boule*, governing the entire action of the poem), and receives no endorsement from the Greek soldiers; but in the *Aithiopis*, Thersites actually reproaches Achilles for behavior that threatens to undermine the Greek cause against Troy.

Quintus Smyrnaeus, writing late (4th C AD) and no doubt with considerable embellishment, gives us an idea of what Thersites might have said to Achilles in an early *Aithiopis*, and even though Quintus' Greek soldiers (like those in the Iliadic episode) reveal no sympathy for Thersites, it is clear that Thersites' taunting of

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4 For a full account of the sources of the myth and iconography of Penthesileia, see Kossatz-Deissmann in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Clasicae (LIMC)* 1.1, p. 161-71, and Kauffmann-Samaras in *LIMC* 1.1, p. 597-601.

5 Cf. Apollodorus Epit. 5.1.2 (*εἶθεν ῥήτοροι ἔθερκεν ὑπὸ Ἀχιλλέως, ὅτις μετὰ τάνατον ἔρωτις τῆς Ἀμαζόνος κτείρει Θηρούνας λοίδοροντας αὐτῶν*), and Propertius 3.11.15 (part of a catalogue of famous women who exerted extraordinary power over men). Quintus Smyrnaeus offers an extended, highly romanticized version of the story, *Posthomerica* 1.538-722, although it is impossible to know how much, if any, of the details derive from the version in the epic cycle.

6 In Quintus' version, the Greeks are said to have taken pleasure in Thersites' death; they hated him because he had quarreled with all of them at some point or other in the past, 1.747-49: χάρι= άρα λαός Ἀχαιῶν ὡς τὸις γὰρ νεκρεῖ πάλαιν ἐπεσβολήσει καθαροὶ ἢ αὐτῶς ἢν λοβήτας; δὲ γὰρ Δαναόν πέλεν αἰδώς. As in the *Iliad*,
Achilles has at least some measure of “legitimacy.” Like all good satirists, after all, Thersites here ridicules a conspicuous lapse of a prominent figure, pointing out that Achilles, smitten with an erotic attraction to the dead Penthesileia, came close to compromising his heroic stature, and so jeopardizing the entire Greek mission:

"Ω̃ Αχιλλεύς φρένας αἰνέ, τι φι νύ σευ ἢπαφε δαίμον θυμόν ἐνί στέρνομεν Ἀμαζόνων εἰνεκα λυγρής ἢ νών κακὰ πολλὰ λιλαίετο μητίσσασθαι: καὶ τοι ἐνὶ φρεοὶ σήμει γυναικαὶ ἢτορ ἔχοντι μεμβλεται ὡς ἀλόχοιο πολύφρωνον ἢν τ’ ἐπὶ ἔθνοις κουρίδην μνήστεως ἐελδόμενοι γαμέσθαι. ὡς (ο') ὀρεγὸν κατὰ δήριν ὑποφθαμένα βάλε δουρί, οὐκέκα θηλυτέρησιν ἄδην ἐπιτέρπεσι ἢτορ, οὐδὲ νυ σοί τι μέμηλεν ἐνὶ φρεοὶ οὐλομένησιν ἀμφ’ ἀρετῆς κλυτὸν ἔργον, ἑπὶν εἰσίδοθα γυναῖκα. οὐκέτι, ποῦ νυ τοι ἐστὶ περὶ ἀθένος ἐβδ νόμισα: τὴ δὲ βασιλῆς ἀμύμονος: οὐδὲ τι οἴσθα ὁσσὶν ὄχος Τρόας γυναικεῖος τέτυκται: οὐ γάρ τερπωλῆς ὀλοκτορὸν ἄλλο βροτοῦν ἐς λέχως ιεμένης, ἢ τ’ ἀφρόνα φῶτα τίθηι καὶ πινυτὸν περ ἑόντα. πόνοι δ’ ἀρα κύδος ὅππεθεί ἀνδρὶ γάρ αἰχμητῇ νίκης κλέος ἔργα τ’ Ἀρης τερπνά, φυγοπολέμω (ἐξ) γυναίκων ἔυδειν εὐνή.

Wretched Achilles, what?—has a spirit beguiled your heart for the pitiful Amazonian woman, who was bent on contriving evil things for us? Ah, your woman-crazed heart is after her as if she’s a respectable wife whom one desires to woo with gifts and marry. Oh, I wish she had struck you first with her spear on the battlefield, since your heart takes such utter pleasure in women, and the moment you see a woman, you have no more care in your wretched soul for the glorious work of *Ares*! You fool!—what’s become of your strength and your brains now? Where’s the power we expect from a distinguished king? Don’t you realize the misery the Trojans have suffered because of their own madness for women? There’s nothing more destructive for mortals than the lust for sex, which makes sane men witless. But glory comes from hard work: for the fame that comes from victory and the deeds of *Ares* are the soldier’s pleasures, while a woman’s bed pleases the war-deserter. So he spoke in his wrangling; but the high-spirited son of Peleus became exceedingly angry. Immediately he struck him with his strong hand on his cheek and ear, and all his teeth flew out on to the ground, and he fell to the ground himself on his face. The blood poured forth from his mouth with a gush. And swiftly the cowardly soul of that worthless man fled from his limbs...

Thersites is treated here more as a target than a satirist, but as we will see shortly, the myth calls into question the legitimacy of Thersites’ death.
It is noteworthy that in the final lines of this passage Thersites articulates the most traditional values of heroic epos (κόδος; νικησσε κλέος; ἔργα Ἄρησος), which he sees threatened by erotic interests (γυναικῶν...έυνη). Ultimately, there is nothing intrinsically subversive about what Thersites says in the Aithiopis against Achilles, and in fact his satire here amounts to a lament for lost virtue and nostalgia for a status quo ante—all stock satirical themes.

Achilles, however, snaps, and what clearly goads him into a murderous rage at Thersites is his insubordination and his presumptuous of a right to criticize his superiors. The Greek soldiers in Quintus’ version echo what Odysseus had said to Thersites in Iliad 2, namely, “quarrel with kings at your own peril!” [Quintus Sm. Posth. 1.751-54; Homer, Iliad 2.247-49]. Epos, it seems, cannot comfortably accommodate a comic figure whose particular métier is satire. Despite the fact that, as Nagy has well pointed out, all the dictional and physical signs point to Thersites as a mythic figure of comedy, epic poetry seems unable to deploy him as he might have been in a comic genre. We have seen Thersites by now playing two roles, first that of the comic target in the Iliad, and then of the satirist in the Aithiopis, but in each case the framing narrative gives only the impression that the comedy he represents is, at best, a mere distraction from the work’s own seriousness of purpose.

The story of Thersites’ death, however, contains some curiously details which suggest that within the narrative his role among the Greeks was misunderstood and his death considered, in the end, unjustified. Proclus’ summary notes that after Achilles had killed Thersites, he had to sail to Lesbos in order to propitiate Apollo, Artemis and Leto and then receive ritual purification from Odysseus (μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα Ἀχιλλεὺς εἰς Λέσβον πλέον, καὶ δύσας Ἀπόλλων καὶ Ἀρτέμιδι καὶ Λητόι καθαύρεται τοῦ φόνου ὑπ’ Ὀδυσσέως). This offers us little more than a summary, but it implies that the case of homicide was problematic enough to merit a complex purification ritual. Something about Thersites’ death did not sit well with all the Greeks, and “strife” arose among them. One exposition for this στάσις is Thersites’ surprisingly distinguished provenance. He turns out to be related to Diomedes

7 Achilles’ trip for ritual purification seems unusual and significant. As Gagarin 1981, p. 17-18, has noted, in all of the Homeric (and cyclic) evidence only one instance of homicide (out of the 31 he collects) other than Achilles’ slaying of Thersites leads to a ritual purification, and he concludes that there is almost “no hint in the epics that religious pollution was one of the consequences of homicide.” As Parker 1983, p. 130-31 has noted, Homer’s silence about purification for bloodshed was noticed even in antiquity, and variously explained. Parker (p. 133-43) argued that, although “purification” is never mentioned in Homer, the concept of pollution was still operative throughout the poems, if itself never explicitly articulated. Nevertheless, the purification of Achilles in the Aithiopis remains our first example of the phenomenon, and the fact that Proclus’ brief summary of the episode makes mention of it implies that the ritual was anything but routine, and that the murder of Thersites was a particularly transgressive act that merited a particularly scrupulous atonement. This may be what led Moulinier 1952, p. 42-43, to describe Achilles’ purification at Lesbos as “un nettoyage… non plus matériel… plutôt un nettoyage… moral.”
(Thersites' father, Agrius, was the brother of Diomedes' grandfather, Oineus). And in Quintus, Diomedes raises angry objections to Achilles' slaying of his relative:


But only the son of Tydeus among the Argives was angry at Achilles over the death of Thersites, since he claimed to share the same blood-line... and he would have raised his hands against the son of Peleus, if the noblest sons of the Achaeans had not crowded round him to urge him against it; and so they restrained him from the other side.

It is difficult to know how to understand this aspect of the story; on the one hand, Quintus' version implies that the dispute over Thersites' death was a private matter between Achilles and Diomedes, soon resolved by the intervention of mediators. On the other, Proclus' summary may suggest that the issue actually divided the Greek army into factions (στάσις γίνεται τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖς). He makes no mention of Diomedes in a short passage otherwise replete with proper names (note Proclus' specificity about the gods to whom Achilles must sacrifice: ἔναντι δὲ τῶν Ἀρτέμιδος καὶ Λητῶν), and the implied causal link between the dispute over Thersites' death and Achilles' trip to Lesbos for ritual purification is painfully tantalizing (metá δὲ ταῦτα Ἀχιλλεὺς εἰς Ἀέας πεσάτο): what actually happened in the narrative to motivate the trip to Lesbos? Was it felt to be the only way to assuage indignation over an unjustified homicide? Was Achilles' particular form of sacrifice demanded by the gods, thereby indicating that the death of Thersites was felt, at least by some, to be cosmically offensive?

The brief summaries of Apollodorus and Proclus are relatively late, leaving many questions of detail unanswered, and Quintus' account seems idiosyncratically romanticized. Nevertheless, there is literary and pictorial evidence indicating that the

8 For further discussion of Thersites' parentage, see Gantz 1993, p. 621-22; also Spina 2001, p. 34.

9 It is possible, of course, that Proclus' phrasing is loose here; to say that "stasis arose among the Greeks," may simply be an imprecise way of representing a feud between Achilles and Diomedes alone. It is hard, however, to overlook the fact that stasis tends to imply strife on a civic scale, and Proclus' phrase leaves the distinct impression that, if the dispute began between Achilles and Diomedes, it soon escalated to the level of genuine factionalism among the Greeks.
story captured people’s imagination quite early. The fourth-century tragedian Chaeremon, for example, composed a play entitled either Achilles *Thersitoktonos*, or simply *Thersites*, and it is highly probable that in the previous century, an unassigned fragment of the comic poet Pherecrates refers to Achilles’ slaying of Thersites:

ο δ’ Ἀχιλέως ἐν ποιο ἐπὶ κόρος αὐτὸν
ἐπάταξεν, ᾧ τε πῦρ ἀπέλαμψ’ ἐκ τῶν γυναῖκων.

Achilles gave him a good blow to the jaw, so that fire shone forth from his mouth (?)

Certainly, punching someone so hard in the jaw that the teeth fall out of one’s mouth was a popular conceit of ancient comic hyperbole, and it is easy to suspect, along with several early scholars, that Chaeremon’s play was a satyr play rather than a tragedy. When distanced from the generic constraints of an epic narrative, it seems, the comic potential of Thersites could be developed more consistently, and the rather dark epic versions of his treatment at the hands of Odysseus and Achilles could be transformed into lighter fare, where an audience might witness the violence directed against him without feeling that any of the blood was “real.” Whether Chaeremon’s play was tragic or satyrical (and hence comedic), in either case there would have been plenty of opportunity for the character Thersites to come into his own, and it is easy to imagine the poet giving him ample space to defend his behavior at Troy, and to articulate his own understanding of the role he played as a satirist intent upon keeping the commanders honest. Beyond this it is difficult speculate about what the plot of such plays might have looked like, but it would not surprise me to find that the comedic Thersites took as his starting point the controversial aspects of the epic episodes, and recounted them from an idiosyncratic and comically self-righteous perspective.

In the absence of more detail about the *Thersitoktonos* episode of the *Aithiopis*, we cannot say how much of an explicit commentary on Thersites’ predicament the epic version itself would have offered, or what in particular a comic version may have assimilated from it or parodied. There remains, however, one important piece of evidence in the form of a fourth-century Apulian volute krater, which may put a little more flesh on the sparse literary evidence we have of the episode, and which, I think, helps support my argument that the scene must have addressed the larger issue of Thersites’ role as satirist at some point in the course of the narrative. I would like to

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10 *TrGF* 71 F 1a-3, p. 217-18. The two extant lines, one by Stobaeus, the other by the Suda, tell us virtually nothing about the plot of the play. For a full treatment of the evidence for Chaeremon’s play, see now Morelli 2001, esp. pp. 73-168.

11 Pherecrates fr. 165 KA; as Paton 1908, p. 413 notes, if the fragment does refer to this episode, it would be the earliest reference we have.

12 Hipponax seems to be the recipient of such a blow at fr. 132 Dg: ὁ δ’ ἐμοὶ ὑδάτες ἐν τοῖς γυναῖκοι πόντις κεκυψάται, and Degani (ad loc. p. 142) collects many other examples of this kind of scene.

13 E.g., Crusius, 1883, p. 152, Nauck in *TrGF* 1, p. 782. Morelli 2001, regards the play as a tragedy; for bibliography and discussion, see p. 90, n. 25.
suggest, moreover, that the vase may well indicate that it was precisely the symposiastic setting that under normal circumstances, at least, gave satirical performances its license for mockery.\footnote{Morelli 2001, pp. 135-68 essentially maps the details of the vase on to Chaeremon’s Achilles Theristoktonos (“Un’analisi più approfondita del cratere di Boston viene pertanto a confermare che tutti i personaggi raffigurati sul vaso, ad eccezione di Pan, dovevano avere una parte più o meno rilevante nell’ Akhilleus Theristoktonos di Cheremone.” p. 147). See his reconstruction of the action, pp. 153-68.}

This vase, housed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, depicts with little doubt the version of the Theristoktonos ascribed by our later sources to the Aithiopis. This large funeral vase offers an extraordinary, and virtually unique, rendition of the episode, and conveys a remarkable amount of narrative detail, even if a good deal of it remains obscure to us [Planche V]. The episode is painted on the front of the vase and its identification is assured by the names inscribed beneath each of the mythological characters. In the center of the scene Achilles and Phoinix are seated on a couch within a small building, no doubt representing Achilles’ hut [Planche VI]. They gaze out at the action taking place towards the right of the building, where Menelaus seems to be restraining Diomedes from drawing his knife and presumably attacking Achilles [Planche VII]. It is likely that Achilles is shown at the moment when he is springing up from his couch in order to meet Diomedes’ challenge. To the left of the building, Agamemnon can be seen approaching, with arm outstretched as if to importune Achilles. Above Agamemnon and Menelaus on either side of the building are two pairs of gods: on the right Athena sits and Hermes stands facing her; on the left, positioned symmetrically with the pair on the right, a winged Poina, represented as an avenging Erinny,\footnote{On the iconography of Poina here, see Paton 1908, p. 411, and Aellen 1994, pp. 39, 65, and 203 no. 9, pl. 13-14. Further bibliography in Morelli 2001, p. 95, n. 13.} sits while Pan stands and looks at her. The members within each divine pair seem to be conversing with each other. The reason for the hubbub is obvious from the scene just below Achilles’ hut, for there we see Thersites gruesomely decapitated, his head shown to be flying and whirling away from his body.\footnote{The name THERSITAS is inscribed immediately above his body. The head is turned so as to face the body from which it was severed, allowing the artist to provide a frontal portrait, as well as to give the impression that the head was rolling away. As Padgett et al. 1993, p. 99, note, “The eyes of the liberated head are shut in death; the grizzled beard shows that Achilles has killed an older man.”} The figure of Thersites is surrounded by a variety of vessels which also appear to be flying chaotically in the air, as if they had been violently knocked or deliberately thrown.\footnote{Padgett et al. 1993, p. 103: “In the foreground and around Automedon…and the dead man are objects testifying to the violent action: a broken lustral basin, a tripod, a staff, a footbath, and a variety of metal vases, including two phialai, a kantharos, an oinochoe, and a volute-krater.”} To the right, a slave
There can be little question that this vase represents some version of the *Thersitoktous* ascribed to the *Aithiopis*, but it is impossible to tell how much of the rich detail found in the vase painting derived from the Cyclic poem. One wonders, for example, whether an avenging Poina made her appearance in the literary version; whether she was merely invoked in principle by Diomedes, aggrieved by the murder of his kinsman, or by Athena or Hermes, for that matter, who also appear on the vase. In any case, the scene on the vase agrees with the summaries on all the major points: Achilles' slaying of Thersites angered Diomedes, and caused a stir among the Greeks. Divine forces at some point entered the plot and vengeance was demanded of Achilles. The vase, however, offers some insight into a crucial aspect of the story which is lacking from the literary record, namely, the occasion on which Achilles killed Thersites. All we learn from the summaries is that Thersites ridiculed Achilles for falling in love with Penethesileia, and while it seems clear that Thersites must have abused Achilles to his face, it is unclear exactly what they were all doing when this happened. In Quintus' account Thersites' rant seems to occur on the battlefield moments after Achilles had killed Penethesileia, but no attempt at greater specificity is made, and Quintus really seems to have had little interest in anything other than the abuse of Achilles and its consequences. In any case, the iconography of the Boston vase points in another direction, strongly suggesting that the episode took place well after the battle in which Achilles had killed Penethesileia was over.

Beneath Achilles' hut the artist was clearly trying to convey the details of a very specific scene as background to the pot's focal moment, where Achilles prepares to meet the challenge from Diomedes. The lower section, in other words, seems to represent an event in past narrative time which occasions the action in a present narrative time depicted in the central portions of the vase. Paton noted the peculiarity of the iconography in his early study of the vase, and in particular the fact that the scene seems to be far removed from the battlefield. He sensed too that the "presence and character of

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18 On the significance of the inscription *dmós*, see Schmidt 2000a and 2001. Schmidt suggests that the generic identification of the slave might indicate that the painter was drawing from his engagement with a text (she suggests epic) rather than a performance. (N.b.: these articles were in press at the time of this writing, so I was unable to see them; but Professor Schmidt kindly shared her ideas, and the references, on this topic with me *per literam*). See now also Morelli 2001, p. 100, n. 33.

19 In *Iliad* 2, Thersites rails against Agamemnon, but it is not made clear exactly what Agamemnon was doing at the time. Presumably he was within earshot (Thersites addresses him in the second person, after all), but he never speaks; rather, Odysseus calls a swift halt to Thersites' abuse well before Agamemnon is allowed to react. One may wonder whether Odysseus functions here as a deliberate buffer, deflecting the possibility of a more extreme form of punishment from the person who was being directly abused, i.e., Agamemnon.

20 Morelli 2001, pp. 60-62 and 153, suggests that Thersites' death (as depicted on the Boston vase and in Chaeremon's dramatic version of it) took place during an impromptu assembly at which the Greek leaders were arguing about the disposition of Penethesilea's armor.
IAMBIC MOCKERY

the scattered vases is surely of some significance,”21 but he rejected prematurely, I think, a simple approach that may well explain the context in which Thersites abused Achilles, and why his response was so controversial. The scattered vessels, in short, seem to indicate a banquet scene gone awry. Achilles’ violent blow in this version sent Thersites’ head and body rolling in different directions, and in their paths they overturned all the accoutrements of the room.22 If Thersites, in fact, mocked Achilles during some sort of convivial occasion, his abuse must be seen in a very different light than if he had confronted him in the flush of battle, when it would have been more difficult, not to mention inappropriate, for an “audience” to grasp markers of irony or other forms of poetic artifice. A social setting such as a banquet, by contrast, would have provided Thersites with an ideal venue to engage in the type of comic performance that he was already known for among the Greeks at Troy (cf. Iliad 2.213-21). As we discussed earlier, his appearance and speech marked him as a comic type, a physically abject and therefore visible figure, whose role seemed always épater la bourgeoisie through his quarrelsome nature. When he engaged in this behavior in the unstaged moments of real life, such as we see in his altercation with Odysseus in Iliad 2, his behavior was more easily perceived as genuinely offensive insofar as there were no contextual cues to indicate that his mockery was anything other than what it claimed to be. The narrating Homer makes this clear enough in this scene by characterizing Thersites as a figure who is actually more worthy of blame than he is of dispensing it. In the Thersitoktonos, however, although we have very little detail of early versions, we can at least say that the punishment of Thersites was felt by some to be problematic, if not utterly undeserved. The Boston vase may offer a clue as to why this was the case, for Thersites may well have mocked Achilles on an occasion when, under normal circumstances, he ought to have license to do so with impunity.

Inventive discourse, after all, whether in the form of poetry, joking or skolia, was frequently associated with sympotic contexts in early Greek culture, and the scene on the

21 Paton 1908, p. 415.
22 Paton 1908, p. 415, brought up the possibility of an “interrupted banquet,” only to reject it on the grounds that “there is no sign of a table, most of the actors bear every mark of hasty arrival, and the attitude of Achilles is scarcely that of one who has been suddenly interrupted...” Whether or not a table is absolutely necessary for indicating a banquet scene, Paton was misled by his assumption that the scene at the bottom of the vase must necessarily be taking place at the same time as the scene in Achilles’ hut. In fact, this seems rather absurd, given the fact that Achilles was the one who had to have dealt the blow to Thersites in the first place, and he is here depicted as conferring with Phoinix in his hut in what appears to be a moment of contemplation, rather than one of violence and mayhem. Paton’s own explanation of the scene is ingenious enough—“our artist had in mind a story in which Thersites met his death at the hands of Achilles while endeavoring to steal a treasure, which probably belonged to some god” (415)—but so speculative and tendentious as to be of little use. Paton was also troubled by the religious associations of some of the vessels in the scene, but at least half of them were appropriate to a banquet scene (note esp. the podanipiter, the oinochoe and the kantharos), and it would not have been inappropriate for the artist to intermingle lustre vessels with domestic ones.
Boston vase, with its obvious emphasis on the overturned vessels, may well indicate that Thersites was killed during just such an occasion. The importance of this possibility cannot be overstated, because it would mean that Thersites’ mockery must be evaluated as a function of a social setting and performative context in which he was, paradoxically, as much a member of an in-group—a philos—as he was a pariah to his target. As Nagy has written, in explaining the dynamics of Archilochus’ psogos against Lykambes, “…the iamboi composed against Lykambes qualify the poet as an ekhos to his victim. Yet even an ekhos may have to deliver his poetry in the context of a receptive audience—who would have to be, by contrast, philos to him.” Adrados had likewise described the symposium as possessing the “quality of a closed society with agonal and sporting elements.” A well known passage from the Homeric Hymn to Hermes (55-58) confirms an early association between banquets, jocular sparring and formalized mockery:

...θεός δ’ ὑπὸ καλὸν άειδεν
ἐξ αὐτοσχέδης πειρώμενος, ἡμέτε κούραι
ἡμῖν τοῖς βαρίσοι παραβολα κερτομέουσιν,
ἄμφι Δία Κρούδην καὶ Μαίαδα καλλικέδιον,
τὸς πάρος ἠρίζεσκον25 ἔταιρεῖν φιλότητι,
ὅτι αὐτοῦ γενεῆν ὀνομακλυτῶν ἐξουσίας.

...and, testing it out, the god sang out improvised bits beautifully, as young men engage in scandalous mockery at festivals. He sang of Zeus the son of Cronos and finely-shod Maia, how they wrangled in the spirit of companionable love, telling the infamous tale of his own birth.

and an elegiac poem, probably from the fourth century), mentions that jesting and comic mockery would routinely precede more serious performances at symposia:

...χρή δ’ ὅταν εἰς τοιοῦτο συνέλθομεν φίλοι ἄνδρες
πράγμα, γελάν παιζεῖν χρησάμενος ἀρετή.

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25 Adrados 1975, p. 279. Adrados also mentions a sympiastic association between “religious elements” and “obscenity and satire.” A specific connection between obscenity and religious aspects of the symposium is difficult to gauge (see Bartol 1992, 66 n. 2), but other ritual aspects of the Greek symposium are well attested. This fact should answer Paton’s denial that the Boston vase could represent a banquet scene on the grounds that there were apparently religious vessels being strewn around the area in addition to whatever vessels we might associate with dining.

26 On the reading ἠρίζεσκον (from erid) rather than ὀρίζεσκον, see Nagy 1979, p. 245 n.5. Nagy speculates that the young men ridiculing each other at a banquet were “reenacting” a “primal erid” that once took place between Zeus and Maia (Hermes’ mother).
...and whenever friends come together for this sort of an affair, they should laugh and joke in accordance with areté, take pleasure as they convene, and insult and jeer in such a way as to bring laughter. Let seriousness follow after, and let us listen to people speaking in their turn: this is the areté of the symposium.

It is clear from both these passages that within a sympotic setting comic mockery could be an integral part of the entertainment; line 4 of fr. 27W, in fact, is explicit that this sort of activity could even be governed by a form of areté. These jocular encounters, in other words, may have appeared unscripted and impromptu, but they were entertaining to the company precisely because of the verbal skills they elicited from the participants. In short, these contests were admired and evaluated in accordance with a bona fide generic system.27

When we consider the iconography of the Boston krater in the light of this literary background, it seems highly probable that, at least in the version that the painter knew, Thersites had been mocking Achilles considerably after he had killed Penthesileia, during some sort of occasion when the Greek troops had gathered for a banquet. Indeed, it may be that Thersites’ reputation as a persistent quarreler arose from his behavior at exactly this type of event. In Iliad 2, we will remember, he was described as ἔχθιστος δ’ Ἀχιλῆι μάλιστα’ ἵνα ἡδ’ Ὀδυσσῆι’, and the reason given is because he had a history of quarreling with them (τῶ γὰρ νεικεῖοκε). Although a symposiastic setting is not specified here, the imperfect tense (νεικεῖοκε) obviously implies routine past behavior, and the famous lines that introduce Thersites (214-16) suggest that he cultivated a comic idiolect when wrangling with his targets:

Θερσίτης δ’ ἐτι μονὸς ἀμετροπῆς ἐκολούθ. ὃς ἐπεα φρεσίν ἤσιν ἄκουσά τε πολλά τε ἤδη μάγι, ἄτιρ σοῦ κατὰ κόσμον, ἐριζείμεναι βασιλεῖσσιν, ἀλλ’ ἄ τι οἱ πάσαι γελοίον Ἀργείουιν ἐμεναί

...But one man, Thersites of the endless speech, still scolded, who knew within his head many words, but disorderly, vain, and without decency, to quarrel with the princes with any word he thought might be amusing to the Argives.

27 On the question of whether the kind of jesting implied by this fragment included specifically iambic performances, see Bartol 1992, p. 66 n.9.
Clearly from the standpoint of epic, Thersites’ speech appeared indecorous and chaotic, and could only be judged negatively, but he knew (εδοικοί) what would draw a laugh and so crafted his rhetoric accordingly. His habit of “quarreling with kings,” in other words, was carried out with a distinct generic self-consciousness which seems remarkably similar to the creative processes at work in the symposiastic mockery that the infant Hermes sang about in his eponymous hymn.

One might, of course, wonder how the deformed, buffoonish Thersites would have ever found himself consorting with the likes of Odysseus and Achilles at banquets on a military campaign, where presumably common soldiers did not much consort with their social superiors. But what the Iliad passage does not reveal, in its transparent effort to dehumanize Thersites, is that he quarrels with the Greek leaders not as an insubordinate social inferior but rather as their social equal. As the details of the Thersioktonas make clear, Thersites’ kinship with Diomedes makes him every bit as princely as those he routinely rails against, and it is thus easy to imagine that he abused them as a philos among philoi. Now, as the Iliad makes clear at 2.220, those for whom Thersites evidently reserved his most intense abuse, Odysseus and Achilles, regarded him as ἔξωθεν, but even their enmity would have evolved within the larger context of a community bound by ties of philia. As Nagy has said of Archilochus’ mockery of Lycaenous and his daughters, although his “insults are against an ekthrous, not a philos [, n]evertheless, they are in all likelihood framed for a general audience of receptive philoi...” Likewise, every time Thersites would contemplate what words would make his listeners laugh (ἢ τι οἱ ἐσφάγαν γελάτον Ἀργείου), he was gauging the effects of his performance on an audience of similarly “receptive philoi.” Certainly, the slaying of Thersites would never have caused the problems it did if no one had felt at least some measure of philetes towards him.

If, then, we are correct to infer from the Boston krater that Thersites had ridiculed Achilles at an event where such behavior might have been expected, possibly even welcomed, we can begin to understand why his death created such a stir. From Achilles’ point of view, Thersites had clearly crossed a line in taunting him about Penesthesileia, but from the audience’s point of view, to kill a man for words spoken during a “performance” sanctioned by occasion and genre must have seemed an equal outrage, even if some of them might have found themselves sympathizing with Achilles’ anger.

This myth seems to illustrate, therefore, the perennial tension in satirical genres

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28 Margot Schmidt has called my attention to an Apulian calyx crater in Taranto in which Thersites oddly appears (his identification assured by an inscription) in the company of such exalted figures as Helen, Ledea, Odysseus and Menelaus (cf. K. Zimmermann in LIMC VIII.1, Supplement pp. 1207-9, catalogue n. 2). Schmidt (2000a) suspects this scene might represent Helen’s suitors—strange company for Thersites to be sure, but if so, it would corroborate the notion that he was the social equal of the other Greek princes.

29 Nagy 1979, p. 251.

30 As West 1974, p. 16, says of a set of particularly abusive elegiac couplets by Theognis (453-56), “It is the perfection of its form, rather than the justice of the sentiment, that invites applause.”
between the poetized world of the satirist's production and the "real" world of his targets.

This tension was clearly felt and articulated on occasion in antiquity, as we can see, for example, from a passage in Plutarch (Lycurgus 12.6). In discussing the traditional mockery at Spartan syphittia, "common meals," he mentions some attempts at self-regulation when the mockery threatened to give real offense. Although mockery was customary on such occasions (αὐτοὶ τε παιίζειν εἴθιστο καὶ σκόπτειν ἄνευ βιωμολοχίας), Plutarch notes, and normally targets did not mind being mocked (σκόπτομεν μὴ δυσχεραίνειν), if the mockery became unbearable, the target could ask for relief and the mocker would stop (μὴ φέροντα δὲ ἔξον παρατέθαι, καὶ οὐ σκόπτον ἐπέπλεω). It would be good to know how common it was for someone to call a halt to formalized mockery of this sort, but even if it were merely an idealized notion Plutarch wanted to believe about Lycurgus' contribution to civilization, the anecdote itself points to an early awareness of the inherent potential for performances of mockery or blame to be misconstrued by targets or audiences, no matter how many formal cues are provided by the mocker (e.g., verbal or gestural) or the occasion itself. Achilles, as it seems from the Boston krater, was unprepared for the abuse he was to receive over Penthesileia, and no doubt uninterested at that point in the customs of after-dinner banter, and his intemperate response proved lethal for Thersites.32

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31 The phrase ἄνευ βιωμολοχίας ("without scurrility") implies perhaps a certain tameness or gentility to this form of jesting (see Nagy 1979, p. 245 n.3). But this probably refers to forms of diction (the mockery was perhaps less crude than it might have been), rather than a lessenning of ad hominem bite. After all, as Plutarch says in the same passage, the Spartans felt it was important to know how to "endure mockery" (σκόμματος ἄνεχοντα).

32 I would like to thank Charalampos Orfanos and Jean-Claude Carrière for inviting me to present a version of this paper at their splendid colloquium on the Symposium. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Elfriede Knauer and Professor Margot Schmidt for their generous assistance on iconographical matters in this paper.


Plate (Planches V, VI, VII)

Connected with the work of the Varrese Painter

Vessel for mixing wine and water (volute krater)

Greek, South Italian. Classical Period, about 340 B.C.

Object Place: Italy, Apulia. Notes: Place Found: from Ceglie de Campo, near Bari.

Ceramic, Red Figure. Height: 124.6 cm, diameter: 56 cm.

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