

The Reader in the Text

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Abstract. I here call attention to a device, found in many literary traditions (and distinct from “prolepsis,” the anticipation of an *opponent’s* argument), where a speaker is mindful of possible reader resistance, or where a spokesman in the text objects on the reader’s behalf to something new and is silenced, or complains of something old and is satisfied. Such passages may signal the presence of late material in a text, and thus (as in these examples) may help to reveal the compositional strata of that text.

Iliad 2:73-75

High on the list of Iliadic military idiocies¹ is Agamemnon’s response to a dream of victory over Troy, a dream sent by Zeus to mislead him, but ostensibly favorable. He calls the Greeks together in 2:50, but presently he proposes to the chiefs:

- 73 First, however, with words I will test them, as is the right thing,
74 Bidding them flee in their many- and well-oared ships to the homeland –
75 Do ye take care, for your part, with words meanwhile to restrain them

Given the headlong rush for the ships which follows, nothing less “right” could be imagined.² I suggest that the phrase ἢ θεέμικ ἐστὶ “as is the right thing” is meant to excuse this nonsense: to lull an envisioned reader over the absurdity of the suggestion.

Themis θεέμικ “right” occurs frequently in the Iliad, usually as social entitlement. Some instances (with Lattimore’s translations) are: 9:33 “as is my *right*,” 9:276 “as is *natural* (between man and woman),” 23:44 “there is no *right*,” 24:652 “as they are *supposed to*.” The *right* of Diomedes to speak in assembly, in 9:33, is based on his status as a chief and thus as a counselor; he is one who is socially entitled to be heard. Iliad 2:73, which lacks this social dimension, seems to be anomalous in this group.

Evidence of Interpolation. The *natural* thing for Agamemnon to do, if he believes the dream, would be to gather the Greeks and march on Troy. Was this the original plot? Or to put the question in a form in which philology can deal with it: Is there a point in Id 2 from which the story takes that course? There is: at 2:445f. The preceding lines, 2:442-444, are nearly identical with the 2:50-52 assembly call. After the shenanigans of the flight to the ships, the tale goes back to its starting point, and at 2:442 it calls the assembly all over again. When the material between 2:52 and 2:445 is removed, the two assembly calls can be merged as one. For the standard reason that the narrative is more coherent without it, 2:53-2:444 looks like an interpolation.

¹Though for a defense, with citation of previous literature, see Cook **Test**.

²For the perplexities of the commentators, see eg Jevons (1886) 307; Knox (1989).

Without that long passage, Iliad 2:50-452 would read this way:

50~442 But Agamemnon commanded his clear-voiced heralds to summon
 51=443 by proclamation to assembly the flowing-haired Achaïans,
 52=444 and the heralds made their cry and the men were assembled swiftly.
 445 And they, the god-supported kings, about Agamemnon
 446 ran marshaling the men, and among them grey-eyed Athena
 447 holding the dear treasured aegis, ageless, immortal;
 450 with this fluttering she swept through the host of the Achaïans
 451 urging them to go forward. She kindled the strength in each man's
 452 heart, to take the battle without respite and keep on fighting. . .

Implications for the Text. If 2:442-445f has a satisfactory narrative flow, and no one has ever said it does not, then so does 2:50-52 *plus* 445f. The largely comical material between the two assembly calls (featuring garrulous Nestor, rude Thersites, and finally repentant Agamemnon) would take about forty minutes in performance.³

Time is often treated luxuriously in the Iliad, with the story line now and then pausing for comic relief (as with the Wounding of Aphrodite, Iliad 5:311-430) or civic affirmation (the peaceful Shield of Achilles, Iliad 18:483-608). Perhaps our long Iliad was once a compact and straightforward repertoire of tales of war, which was later distended by bards who were playing to audiences more leisured, and more civilian, than those for whom the original accounts had been designed?

Mahâ-Parinibbâna Sutta 5:41-44

The Buddha has been traveling from village to village with his disciples; in those travels, at 5:1, he has reached Kusinârâ. He has previously been taken ill, and his followers know that he will soon die. Contemplating that approaching death, the disciple Ânanda mourns at length (5:32-35), as is not necessarily unnatural. But he also suddenly finds time to make an objection, not to the death of the Buddha as such, but to the fact that it is taking place in a mere jerkwater town of no repute. Then:

5:41. When he had thus spoken, the venerable Ânanda said to the Blessed One, "Let not the Blessed One die in this little wattle-and-daub town in the midst of the jungle, in this branch township. For, Lord, there are other great cities, such as Campâ, Râjagaha, Sâvatthi, Sâketa, Kosambi, and Benâres. Let the Blessed One die in one of them. There, there are many wealthy nobles and Brahmans and heads of houses, believers in the Tathâgata, who will pay due honor to the remains of the Tathâgata." [42] "Say not so, Ânanda! Say not so, Ânanda, that this is but a small wattle-and-daub town in the midst of the jungle, a branch township. Long ago, Ânanda, there was a king, by name Mahâ-Sudassana, a King of Kings, a righteous man who ruled in righteousness, Lord of the Four Quarters of the Earth, conqueror, the protector of his people, possessor of the seven Royal Treasures. This Kusinârâ, Ânanda, was the royal city of King Mahâ-Sudassana, under the name of Kusâvatî, and on the east and on the west it was twelve leagues in length, and on the north and on the south it was seven leagues in breadth."

³A modern sample suggests 6.28 seconds per hexameter line as a probable median tempo.

