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ENGL-226

Praise and Blame: The Prerequisite for Herosim

Homeric paradoxes are the building blocks of the *Iliad* that make the epic poem ever so realistic, relatable, and dramatic. Paradoxes are found throughout the poem and play various roles. For example, thematic paradoxes like *heroism and inhumanity* carry swift-footed Achilles into battle as the great hero commits merciless, rageful atrocities. *Life and sudden death* drag Hektor's dead body from innocent Andromache and newborn Astyanax. Even stylistic paradoxes like *Tragic pathos and austere objectivity* help Homer implicitly describe gruesome stories in a factual manner without overly emotional rhetoric. Moreover, paradoxes give the *Iliad* depth and tension while allowing ambiguity to rest in between the lines. However, the theme of *praise and blame* in particular sticks out from the rest in its interplaying complexity and its possible revelatory subliminal messages. This essay seeks to unravel the paradoxical theme of praise and blame through Helen of Troy's equally paradoxical character— a character whom Homer curiously develops this theme with. Through her *praise and blame* paradigm, Helen's character offers a critique of the heroic code of war, a commentary on the nature of gifts and flaws, and ultimately reframes the *Iliad*— not simply as a tale of war and heroism, but as a cautionary moral narrative.

Homer partakes in a long history of archaic character development inasmuch that praise, blame, and identity construction is common in Greek Tragedy and its purpose in archaic poetry can shed light on Homer's use of the similar trope.¹ Homer echoes the praise and blame

¹ The heroic identity is one that is shaped through many facets, one deriving from "a crisis from a disjunction between praise they seek, and the praise or blame awarded to them." Cook, p. 70.

tradition— a tradition once its own archaic genre— by establishing opposition within his Iliadic characters for the purpose of character development. The tension between the contrasting qualities or perceptions can be seen as a heroic trial in itself— a trial more internal and involved than a blatant battle or quest. Homer’s blame and praise is not always as straightforward as the later Greek tragedy use of the theme.² This is to say that while later Greek tragedy focuses on the direct destructiveness of praise and blame, Homer sets the juxtaposed qualities, situations, and perceptions within the narrative as a whole through speech and character interaction— praise and blame is a theme, not a motif. Many times, his explicit character evaluations shine through his passive, objective language. However, Homer’s voice has judgmental tone— often stemming from Greek morals— but his commentary in passages like the short obituary-like-death sentiments that imply emotion in detached phrasing; or the implicit judgments he associates with motifs like *evil deeds*, offers a more unspoken, inherent moral framework. Even more so, he situates his character development through a long process that is often covert and attached with equally covert commentary. Besides the obvious, directly addressing apostrophes or detailed motifs or character communication or divine involvement, the hidden pathos shines through the prose especially via the praise and blame theme.

This theme is most significant because it manifests differently and evokes different results for differently developed characters. Achillius, for example, who “stands as a great bulwark of battle over all Achains,” (1.284) is directly and blatantly praised by Nestor here and many times again. Phoinix (9. 490-95), Hektor (6. 420-25), and even Zeus with Thetis (Book 18, 70-95) all praise swift-footed Achillius with repetitive positive epithets, unconcealed words of

² Sophocles' Ajax and Euripides' Heracles— two warrior characters who face crises related to how they perceive themes and how they are perceived— are examples of the tension between praise and blame. The Greek characters seek to establish their identity as heroes and do so with attempts of failure. Ibid.

praise, and a god-like status which gradually intensifies with his praise. However, the blame in which Achillius faces is somewhat more veiled insofar as his blame stems from his unbalanced heroic code— forewarned by Phoinix (9. 442-43) and somewhat equalized with Priam (Homer, 24)— and the consequences of such polarized heroic code seen through the excessive revenge of Patroclus (Homer, 18 & 20) or his inability to balance words and deeds (Suzuki, 44). Achillius' blame also derives from the gods, who like Apollo fault Achillius for his lack of justice, pity, and shame (24.39-45)— resulting in an implicit and anticipated form of blame. The correlation between Achillius' character development and the timing of his blame is also curious. This is to say Achillius enters the poem being praised and while his praise continues, his character remains quite shallow. He does not change; he lacks duality and is ultimately unrelatable— until his consequences begin to materialize, catch up to him and blame is promised. Since the epic moves towards a form of resolution— Achillius' resolution materializing with Priam—it appears Achillius escapes blame in the *Iliad* and for the most part, Achillius' little blame is shadowed in his great praise. However, Homer seems to suggest it is not the excess of glory which yields his little blame, but rather Achillius' blameworthy flaws derive from a deeper questioning of heroic norms. In other words, since Achillius is the epitome of the traditional hero, he is often not blamed for his present actions, but rather his blame is forewarned—even his consequences and death do not appear in this poem. The *Iliad* suggests glory, honor, and pride are the most important qualities in a hero. But in the greater Homeric tradition, it appears Homer insinuates Achillius ought to be blamed for his excessive heroic qualities— not heard in the words of denunciation, but rather through the whispering pathos coming from Achillies's impending blame and death.

To quickly draw contrast on the different ways Homer uses this theme, Alexandros could be seen as the counterexample of the manifestation of praise and blame in comparison to Achillius and a prelude to Helen of Troy. Alexandros is a primary target of blame in the *Iliad* given his violation of the guest-friendship code and his implications in starting the Trojan War. He is blamed by Hektor (3.39-43) and by most of Troy for the majority of the poem. In direct contrast to Achillius, Alexandros begins in a blameworthy state, and he is never truly praised for anything other than his beauty and passion. It is not until he kills Achillies— an event neither occurring in the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey*, but in later Greek myths— that praise *could* be given. But because his only praiseworthy trait is beauty, we see again an incomplete character development similar to Achillius. Both characters are eventually praised and blamed, but not in the *Iliad*. Achillius' impending blame and Paris's possible forthcoming praise could suggest the *Iliad* is more a cautionary tale— deterring audiences from being moral agents, who like many Iliadic characters, are incomplete in their development. Nonetheless it is worth looking at the personification of blame in the *Iliad* to recognize the re-occurring sentiment Homer attempts to convey.

Helen of Troy's blame and praise paradigm is where Homer fully develops the significance of this theme. Though it is insinuated Helen is to blame for the entire conflict, she is only blamed by herself through wishing a "bitter death" upon herself (3.173) and calling herself "a nasty bitch evil intriguing" (6.344). Her self-blame materializes in later Greek plays and adaptations but within the context of the *Iliad*, her character is excessively praised for her beauty to the point of being synonymous with goodness. She is never treated poorly by the Trojans who fight for her nor blamed by the King who sacrifices everything for her. Her self-deprecation could be seen as a form of manipulation given others would be less inclined to blame an-already

self-blamed, shamed beauty and instead grant her safety and kindness. However, I find this unlikely given the allusions to her blame by Hektor, for example, who wish Alexandros never married (3.40). Rather, Helen's blame from others seems unwarranted and unneeded because the praise and blame-character-development-theme has already been fulfilled by Helen's own doing—a manifestation of her full-character development and accompanied heroic power. This is to say that unlike Achillius or Alexandros who wait for full character-development to achieve heroism— via others bestowing the balancing blame or praise— Helen is developing herself and consequently gives herself the power of a fully developed character. This power materializes when she shames Alexandros for being cowardice (6.330-50) and thus holds the moral high ground for bestowing praise, shame, and blame. Her morals come to the forefront, her words hold weight, and she acts heroic in her plead for virtue as a fully developed character. It should be noted now who I am referring to as a fully developed heroic character.

Hektor has a depth to him that is uncanny amongst the Iliadic characters. His duality as a prince of Troy, and a father and husband bring about a complex tension between warrior and protector. This is to say that when Hektor makes a decision, it is equally as complex as his character. He lies in direct contrast with superficial Achillius who has one duty— being a warrior— and makes decisions out of one goal in mind— whatever will yield the most glory. Achillius is undeveloped and as argued above, cannot reach the balanced heroic code given the lack of blame, growth, and self-awareness. Hektor's choices carry more weight because more tension goes into them and as a fully balanced and developed character, Hektor is a true hero because though he is bestowed praise, he is balanced through blame (22.35-40). It goes without saying his defeat is a result of Achillius' excess of heroism— the same excess that dooms Achillius— not a result of deficient heroism.

That being said, I argue Helen is a foil of a hypothetically developed Achillius and Alexandros in that she does what Alexandros and Achillius fail to do: develop themselves into a hero. All three have divine gifts that imbalance their characters, but Helen equalizes her divine-flaw-inducing-gifts through self-blame. She can be seen in the same moral light as Hektor because both are balanced by praise and blame and consequently balance their morals and their heroic code. It appears that Achillius' contemporaries will never blame him for his praiseworthy gloriousness nor Alexandros praised in his time for mere passion and beauty. Even beautiful Helen would not be blamed by others. But through the implicit message evoked through Helen, Homer might suggest the heroic code is flawed. It is not how much glory or beauty the character has which makes them a hero, but rather how their flaws and gifts are balanced—how their praise and blame is equalized. As societal norms, beauty and glory are praised to the point of deflecting flaws or blame, but as Homer suggests, it takes balance to become a hero.

Works Cited

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