How Even a Classical Homer Might Save From Harm the Heroic Glory of Ajax

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For example:
How even a Classical Homer might save from harm the heroic glory of Ajax

2021.05.17 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. Going beyond what I attempted in the previous essay, where I tried to show that Pindar’s version of Homer might save from harm the heroic glory of Ajax (Nagy 2021.05.10, linked here), I will now try to show that “our” version of Homer might also be viewed as such a source of salvation—even though “our” Homer differs from Pindar’s Homer by shining relatively less light on the glory of Ajax. And why does the brightness of the hero’s glory get somewhat dimmed by this Homer of ours? The primary cause, as I showed already in my previous essay, is that “our” Homeric Odyssey figures Ajax to be only the third-best of all the Achaean heroes who fought at Troy—though he is clearly figured as second-best in “our” Homeric Iliad as also in the songs of Pindar. But there are also secondary causes, as I will show in the present essay, for a relative downgrading of Ajax both in the Odyssey and even in the Iliad of “our” Homer. Before I proceed, however, I need to confront a basic question: who, in any case, is “our” Homer? In my previous essay, I left my readers with an opportunity to infer a superficial answer: that this Homer of ours was the poet whom the ancient Greek world credited with composing the text of the Iliad and Odyssey as we know it. But now, in this essay, I introduce opportunities for deeper inferences by redefining “our” Homer as a “Classical Homer,” to be distinguished from a “Preclassical Homer.” When I say “Classical Homer,” I have in mind the reception of the Iliad and Odyssey, notionally composed by Homer, as performed at the seasonally recurring festival of the Panathenaia in Athens after the reorganization of this festival by Pericles in the fifth century BCE, that is to say, in the classical period. This “Classical Homer” represents the Athenian traditions of Homeric performance that I reconstructed in a book bearing a most relevant title, Homer the Classic (Nagy 2009|2008, especially Chapter 4). And this “Classical Homer” must be contrasted with a “Preclassical Homer” as reconstructed in a matching book bearing another most relevant title, Homer the
Preclass (Nagy 2010|2009). Such a “Preclassical Homer” is responsible, as I will argue in this essay, for the picturing of Ajax as the second-best of the Achaeans, not the third-best, by virtue of the credit he deserves for saving from harm the dead body of Achilles as the best of the Achaeans. A picture of this moment of salvation is what I show as the cover illustration for my present essay. The picture, which replicates the cover illustration for my book bearing the title The Best of the Achaeans (Nagy 1979/1999), is a stylized composite of twin pictures we see painted on the surface of a most celebrated work of Preclassical art known as the François Vase, manufactured in Athens and dated to the early sixth century BCE. The twin paintings, each of the two positioned immediately above the twin handles of the vase, are simultaneously retelling, in the medium of visual arts, what was being retold about the heroes Achilles and Ajax in the medium of verbal arts as practiced in Preclassical Athens, where the custom of festive competitions in performing Homeric poetry had already taken hold. So, the picturing of Ajax on the François Vase shows that the status of this hero as second-best of the Achaeans can be validated, at least selectively, in epic traditions stemming from a “Preclassical Homer.” But now, in the present essay, I will argue further that this status of Ajax is also validated, though less brightly, by the “Classical Homer” of “our” Iliad and Odyssey, both epics taken together.
Above Handle 1 of the François Vase: Ajax carrying the body of Achilles. Attic black-figure volute krater by Kleitias (painter) and Ergotimos (potter), ca. 570–560 BCE. Florence, Museo Nazionale Archeologico, inv. no. 4209. Photo via Flickr.
§1. I start by asking: what exactly is it that we see being retold about Achilles and Ajax in the twin pictures positioned at both handles of the François Vase? We see Ajax, with knee buckling as he struggles to lift the dead weight of Achilles, the Best of the Achaeans. Now that he has finally been killed in the Trojan War, Achilles as a dead body has become far larger-than-life-size, and the towering figure of Ajax, renowned for his own enormous size in epic traditions, is suddenly dwarfed by the even more enormous corpse of Achilles that he is trying to carry away to safety—away from the Trojan enemy. We catch a glimpse of this corpse in “our” version of the Homeric *Odyssey*, that is, in the “Classical” version. In Rhapsody 24 lines 39–40 of the text in “our” *Odyssey* as we read it, we learn what the ghost of Achilles is retrospectively being told about the aftermath of his death at Troy, and we can even see what
he looked like as a corpse: σὺ δὲν στροφάλιγγι κονίς | κείσο μέγας μεγαλωστέ 'There you were, lying in a swirl of dust. | You lay there so huge in all your hugeness’. In another essay (Nagy 2012:50), where I comment on the context of this Homeric passage, I have explained how the corpse of Achilles, who has finally been killed in the Trojan War, is described here as larger-than-life-size because he is already viewed as a cult hero—and cult heroes are conventionally pictured as far larger in death than they had been in life. I will not repeat at this point the further details I collect in that essay with reference to *Odyssey* 24.39–40, confining myself here instead to signaling, most simply, a most significant absence: Ajax is not mentioned by the “Classical Homer” in this passage I quoted from “our” *Odyssey*.

§2. The absence of Ajax in this passage I quoted from the “Classical Homer” indicates that the earlier phases of Homeric poetry in Preclassical Athens were different from what has survived from later phases of this poetry as curated in Classical Athens and thereafter. The repertoire of “Preclassical Homer” was more fluid and less consistent than the repertoire of the “Classical Homer” as reflected in our received textual tradition of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Conversely, the repertoire of the “Classical Homer” as transmitted in “our” *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was far more rigid and far more consistent, but such consistency required a measure of selective vagueness for the sake of mediating alternative versions that had been inherited from the earlier fluidity exemplified by the “Preclassical Homer.”

§3. One way for Classical Homeric poetry to achieve such selective vagueness, as I just called it, was to omit or at least to mitigate any mutually contradictory details originating from different versions current in the earlier era of Preclassical Homeric poetry. In the case of the omission I have just noted, where Ajax is not mentioned in the reference to the corpse of Achilles in “our” *Odyssey*, at 24.39–40, the evidence of vase-paintings that date back to Preclassical Athens shows a vast variety of different versions of tales retelling how Ajax lifted and carried the body of Achilles to safety after this Iliadic hero himself was killed off in the Trojan War. In an article by Susan Woodford and Margot Loudon (1980), we find a meticulous collection of Preclassical variants that show Ajax carrying the body of Achilles, and the authors summarize (p. 26) the types of variation, with the number of examples for each type given in parentheses:

- Ajax alone, moving right (5)
- Ajax alone, moving left (7)
- Ajax with Thetis (6)
Ajax with Thetis, warrior or warriors (men other than Peleus) (11)
Ajax with Thetis and Peleus (9)
Ajax with Thetis, Peleus and warriors (3)
Ajax with warriors only (no female figures or old men) (10)
Ajax with Thetis (?) and another female figure (5)
“non-standard” representations (8)

I reserve for later comment the involvement of the goddess Thetis, mother of Achilles, in many of the Preclassical epic situations that we see being pictured in these paintings. For the moment, though, I highlight already the pathfinding work of Laura Slatkin (2011) on what I would describe here as the Preclassical background of the immortal Thetis in her epic involvements with her mortal son.

§4. Of all the various surviving Preclassical visual representations of Ajax carrying the body of Achilles, the earliest is the set of twin pictures, already noted, that we see positioned above the twin handles of the François Vase—pictures dating from the early sixth century BCE and originating from a painter self-identified as Kleitias. The nakedness of the hero’s body here, devoid of his armor, is to be contrasted with other Preclassical representations, two of which originate from a painter self-identified as Exekias, who dates back to the middle of the sixth century BCE. The slightly later paintings by this painter represent the dead Achilles as still wearing his armor, and thus the implication here is that the armor of Achilles was rescued from the Trojan enemy and restored to the Achaean side. By contrast, such implications cannot simply be assumed in the case of the action painted by the slightly earlier painter, since the body of Achilles carried by Ajax is shown naked.

§5. In the case of a comparable situation narrated by the “Classical Homer” of “our” Iliad, I highlight the nakedness of the body of Patroklos when it is rescued from the Trojans in Iliad 17: the corpse is naked here because Hector, after the killing of Patroklos, had despoiled the dead body of the armor that his opponent had been wearing—armor that belonged to Achilles himself. In this case, the naked body—the body without the armor—is lifted and carried back to the headquarters of the Achaeans by a pair of heroes, Menelaos and Meriones, while a second pair of heroes fights off the pursuing Trojans. I highlight a further detail here: the second pair is in this case a grammatically dual combination of “our” Ajax, son of Telamon, with the “other” Ajax, son of Oileus. These and other such details in the retelling of the tale by “our” Homer about the death of Patroklos and about the rescue of his body—as also about the non-rescue of
the armor of Achilles—will be relevant, as my argumentation proceeds, to what I have already been saying at §2 about the Classical Homeric poetry of “our” Iliad and Odyssey. To say it again here: the relative rigidity of this poetry required a measure of selective vagueness for the sake of mediating alternative versions that had been inherited from the earlier fluidity exemplified by Preclassical Homeric poetry.

§6. For now, however, I first need to concentrate further on the fluidity we see in the different versions of tales dating back to a “Preclassical Homer” as reflected in the vase-paintings from the Preclassical era in Athens and elsewhere. These different versions converge, at least in part, with still further different versions of tales that were eventually curated in a textual tradition, now almost entirely lost, of what was known in the ancient world as the Epic Cycle. There is an abidingly useful analysis of such convergences in a book by Jonathan Burgess (2001) about the various tales told about the Trojan War in the Epic Cycle, and I focus here on his analysis of one particular set of tales that center on a quarrel that took place between Ajax and Odysseus after Achilles was finally killed off in the Trojan War. The quarrel was over the armor of Achilles, now that he was dead. In terms of these tales, each one of the two quarreling heroes claimed to deserve possession of the armor that had once belonged to the Best of the Achaeans. By implication, whoever got possession would now assume the honor of being considered the Best. We read about this quarrel in a plot-summary, written by one Proclus, of an epic known as the Aithiopis, attributed to Arctinus of Miletus, which was part of the so-called Epic Cycle. The tale about the quarrel was retold at the end of the Aithiopis (Proclus-summary p. 106 lines 16–17 ed. Allen 1912). And it was also retold in the Little Iliad, attributed to Lesches of Mytilene in Lesbos, another epic that was part of the Cycle. In this case, as I pointed out in the previous essay (§5 of Nagy 2021.05.10, linked here), the information about the retelling comes from the scholia for Aristophanes Knights 1056, reporting on the lost text of the Little Iliad and quoting a fragment from that epic (F 2 ed. Allen 1912). Such variations, as I also pointed out in the previous essay, tend to contradict each other in content and are therefore censured by the poetics of Pindar, since the contradictions are viewed as deceptions—the transmission of which is to be blamed on a “Homer” who is imagined as a prototypical master poet of all epic poetry.

§7. I disagree, however, with the argument (as advanced, for example, by Frank Nisetich 1989:22) that Pindar’s poetics in his Nemean 7 had blamed the Homer of our Odyssey for perpetuating such deceptions —while Praising, in his Isthmian 4, the Homer of our Iliad, where no such deceptiveness can supposedly be found. Rather, as I argued in the previous essay (again, Nagy 2021.05.10, linked here), the deceptiveness that we see being narrated in Pindar’s
Nemean 7 is directly blamed not on “Homer” but on Odysseus, deceitful speaker that he can be. As for “Homer,” he gets a share of the blame only indirectly—and only to the extent that he might be reporting the deceitful words of Odysseus, thereby perpetuating the deceit.

§8. But the deceitfulness of Odysseus can only go so far, within the framework of “our” Homeric Odyssey. Even in “our” Odyssey, the “Classical Homer” does not allow Odysseus to perpetuate the idea that it was he, not Ajax, who was now the best of the Achaeans—by virtue of his intelligence, as opposed to the strength of Ajax. True, in our Odyssey 11, Odysseus does in fact concede to the angry ghost of Ajax that there had been, yes, a quarrel between the two of them over the armor of Achilles and that there had also been, yes, an adjudication organized by the Achaeans, which resulted in the awarding of the armor to Odysseus and not to Ajax, so that Odysseus—a final yes—became the winner and Ajax, the loser. But the ultimate question remains: who is now the Best of the Achaeans? At least in Odyssey 11, the answer to this question remains, retrospectively, that Ajax was the best of the Achaeans after Achilles (lines 551–552). And the same answer holds, from the standpoint of Odysseus himself, in the Ajax of Sophocles (lines 1338–1342; commentary by Sheila Murnaghan 2019:29).

§9. A further relevant observation I need to make is that our Odyssey never even shows Odysseus wearing the armor of Achilles. Even further, if we go back in time to the point where this armor is recovered after Achilles is killed, Odysseus is almost never seen carrying it back to safety. There is a glaring exception in Ovid’s Metamorphoses 13 (284–285), where Ulixes claims that it was he who carried away from harm both the body and the armor of Achilles (on the poetics of Ovid here, I am guided by the analysis of Irene Peirano Garrison 2019 chapter 5). Elsewhere, however, the closest that Odysseus ever gets to the armor, before his ultimate victory, is in the narrative of the Aithiopis (Proclus—summary p. 106 lines 9–11 ed. Allen 1912), where we see him in the act of fighting off the pursuing Trojans while Ajax is carrying away from harm the body and presumably also the armor of Achilles, who has just now been killed jointly by the hero Paris and the god Apollo.

§10. And there can even be some doubt about any ultimate victory for Odysseus over Ajax, in the light of a myth reported by Pausanias (1.35.4), and there are further references in the Greek Anthology, epigrams 9.115 and 9.116: as Odysseus was sailing back home from Troy, a storm caused the armor of Achilles to fall overboard and get swept away by the currents of the sea, which carried back this treasure to the shores of the Hellespont at Troy—all the way to the headlands of Rhoiteion, dominated by a tumulus housing the body of the hero Ajax.
Bibliography


