

MISZELLEN

‘NO COMMENT’: ILIAD 6.62*

Agamemnon has just appealed to Menelaos to reject the supplication of Adrastos:

ὥς εἰπὼν ἔτρεψεν ἀδελφειοῦ φρένας ἦρωος
αἴσιμα παρεϊπών (Il. 6.61–2)

The lines are usually translated as ‘With these words the hero changed his brother’s mind, giving appropriate advice’. However, the phrase αἴσιμα παρεϊπών has been found difficult, since it makes the poet appear to endorse a brutal course of action, the killing of a suppliant.¹ The primary cause of this confusion, I suspect, is that interpreters have understandably been distracted by the ponderous word αἴσιμα, without giving due attention to παρεϊπών.² The word is treated more or less as an ordinary verb of speech, the παρ(α)- element imparting a persuasive/hortatory nuance:³ ‘advising what was αἴσιμα’; that is, taking αἴσιμα to refer to the content of Agamemnon’s speech to Menelaos. Three approaches have been taken to exculpate the poet from this disturbing narratorial comment. Some have argued that the phrase means exactly what it says – that in the general context of the Trojan War, or due to the position of the Atreidai within it, the killing of a suppliant is justified: for the poet as for his audience such advice is αἴσιμα.⁴ Taplin has turned to narratological analysis, according to which the phrase αἴσιμα παρεϊπών is not to be viewed as a statement by the primary narrator-focalizer (‘Homer’), but as an internal secondary focalization, reflecting only what Agamemnon argues, and Menelaos accepts, as being αἴσιμα.⁵ The problem with both of these interpretations is that they

*) I am grateful to Greg Horsley, Elizabeth Minchin, Greg Stanton and the anonymous readers for RhM for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

1) See most recently B. Graziosi / J. Haubold, *Homer: Iliad Book VI* (Cambridge 2010) on Il. 6.62.

2) Stated succinctly by D. Wilson, *Ransom, Revenge, and Heroic Identity in the Iliad* (Cambridge 2002) 166: “The question turns on the meaning of *aisima* in 6.62 and on whose point of view or focalization it expresses.”

3) Only S. Goldhill, *Supplication and Authorial Comment in the Iliad: Iliad Z 61–2*, *Hermes* 118 (1990) 373–6 at 375–6, discusses this aspect at any length.

4) For different interpretations along these lines see G. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume II: Books 5–8* (Cambridge 1990) on Il. 6.61–2; H. van Wees, *Status Warriors. War, Violence and Society in Homer and History* (Amsterdam 1992) 188 and 384 n. 50; Wilson (n. 2 above) 167; M. Stoevesandt, *Feinde – Gegner – Opfer. Zur Darstellung der Troianer in den Kampfszenen der Ilias* (Basel 2004) 152–5; B. Sammons, *Agamemnon and his Audiences*, *GRBS* 49 (2009) 159–85 at 175–80.

5) O. Taplin, *Homeric Soundings* (Oxford 1992) 51–2.

give undue emphasis to Agamemnon's argument, setting it up in opposition to Menelaos' behaviour, which, if not in fact more appropriate than Agamemnon's advice, is at least still 'αἴσιμα', given the negative connotations of rejecting a suppliant elsewhere in the poem. The third approach focuses on the meaning of αἴσιμα. Simon Goldhill takes αἴσιμα in the sense 'according to fate', and the phrase as a whole to mean "swaying him with fateful words", referring to what will be αἴσιμον for Adrestos. Yet this interpretation contravenes a clear distinction in Homeric usage of the adjective αἴσιμος: it only means 'determined by fate' when used in the neuter singular, which is always qualified by an infinitive; the plural αἴσιμα, on the other hand, is always used in the sense 'in due measure', 'appropriate'.⁶

In the Homeric poems, verbs of speech compounded with παρα- denote that the words being described have changed or are intended to change the interlocutor's existing behaviour or attitude.⁷

For example:

ἀλλά που αὐτὸν θυμὸς ἐποτρύνει ...
αὐτάρ τοι καὶ κείνῳ ἐγὼ παραμυθησαίμην
τῆ ἴμεν ἦ κεν δὴ σύ ... (Il. 15.43–6)

No – I suppose it's his own spirit that urges him on ... In fact I am willing to advise him, like me, to follow you ...

ἀλλ' ἦ τοι παύεσθαι ἀνωγέμεν ἀφροσυνάων
μειλιχίους ἐπέεσσι παραυδῶν (Od. 16.278–9)

But tell them to stop their foolish behaviour, talking them round with gentle words.

This is the general context in which the phrase αἴσιμα παρεϊπών must be interpreted. Menelaos is responding correctly to the appeal of a suppliant (Il. 6.51–3), but Agamemnon counters this with the argument that the Trojans have forfeited any such claim due to Paris' earlier violation of guest-friendship. Both characters can be

6) Cf. LfgrE s.v. αἴσιμος (B). Goldhill's attempt (n.3 above) to interpret examples of αἴσιμα in the sense of 'fated' do not convince. For example, Il. 9.245–6 ἡμῖν δὲ δὴ αἴσιμον εἶη / φθίσθαι ἐνὶ Τροίῃ unambiguously means 'it is fated that I die at Troy'; likewise Od. 22.46 ταῦτα μὲν αἴσιμα εἶπας, ὅσα ῥέζεσκον Ἀχαιοὶ unambiguously means 'You have spoken appropriately of all the things the Akhaians have done': the relative clause clearly indicates that Eurymakhos is referring to Odysseus' condemnation of their past behaviour and not to his subsequent threat of vengeance, as argued by Goldhill (375): "Odysseus' words may be proper (as Eurylochus [sic] may be thought to be claiming), but they are also crucially *fateful* for the suitors, whose αἴσιμον ἦμαρ this is." Equally strained is the attempt by N. Yamagata, ΑΙΣΙΜΑ ΠΑΡΕΙΠΩΝ: A Moral Judgement by the Poet?, PP 45 (1990) 420–30, to interpret the usage by reference to the word's etymological origin (αἶσα = 'share', 'measure'): "measuring and comparing two matters as if on the scales, putting 'portions' of the argument in a well-measured, orderly fashion" (428) and so "persuading/dissuading by a well measured/-balanced argument" (429).

7) Cf. E. Schwyzer, Griechische Grammatik, v.2 (ed. A. Debrunner) (Munich 1950) 493 ("eine Veränderung bewirken"); P. Chantraine, Grammaire homérique, v.2 (Paris 1953) 120, is less clear on this point.

viewed as approaching the issue appropriately (αἴσιμα), but Agamemnon's view prevails and Menelaos changes his mind.

The two examples above illustrate the Homeric usage of these verbs: the words by which the person persuades are in the dative, or the action advocated is denoted by an infinitive – a distribution which should make one hesitate before taking αἴσιμα to refer to the content of Agamemnon's speech.⁸ This leads directly to the last example, crucial for the interpretation of Il. 6.62. Odysseus, meeting Akhilleus in the underworld, heaps praise upon his dead comrade, eulogizing him as king over all the dead. Akhilleus, all too aware of the vapid existence of an insubstantial wraith, vehemently rejects the compliment:

μη δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παράδω. φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ.
βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρορος εὖν θητεύμεν ἄλλω ...

(Od. 11.488–9)

Do not, glorious Odysseus, try to make me think differently of death.
I would prefer to work in a field as a hired hand on another's property ...

The accusative θάνατον denotes the topic in relation to which Odysseus is trying to console Akhilleus: he is not 'advising death', but 'speaking death aside', so that it might mean something different (this is the force of παρα-). Likewise, at Il. 6.62 the accusative αἴσιμα does not refer to Agamemnon's words ('advising what was αἴσιμα'), but to the topic in relation to which he is trying to change Menelaos' mind. Literally, 'speaking αἴσιμα aside' (so that it might mean something different): 'talking him round as to what was appropriate.' The phrase αἴσιμα παρεῖπὼν is not an internal secondary focalization, nor is the narrator himself making an evaluative comment about what is αἴσιμα; rather, the phrase simply describes what happened between the two characters: that Menelaos, in intending to spare a suppliant, was acting in accordance with what he took to be αἴσιμα, but that Agamemnon's speech has changed his mind on this point. The phrase is neutral, and it is left to the audience to decide whether Agamemnon's argument is indeed more appropriate.⁹

8) Dative: Il. 6.337, 14.208, 24.771, Od. 15.53; infinitive: Il. 1.577–8, 9.417–18 ~ 684–5, 14.360, 15.45–6, Od. 14.488–9; dat. and inf.: Od. 22.213–14. Lack of attention to this has led some merely to quote as a parallel the only other occurrence of αἴσιμα with a verb of speech: Od. 22.46, τὰντα μὲν αἴσιμα εἶπας (Goldhill [n. 3 above] 375; Taplin [n. 5 above] 52). There, however, τὰντα is the direct object of the verb, and αἴσιμα a predicative adjective. The parallel is therefore not apt. The emphasis has to be on verbs of speech compounded with παρα-. At Od. 18.178–9, Εὐρυνόμη, μη τὰντα παράδω, κηδομένη περ. / χρῶτ' ἀπονίπτεσθαι καὶ ἐπιχρίεσθαι ἀλοιφῇ, we find the common use of anaphoric τὰντα to refer back to the interlocutor's preceding words (e. g., Il. 3.399, 7.284, 13.292 etc.), then the construction reverts to the expected infinitive.

9) It is important to note that this analysis does not necessarily invalidate the interpretations referred to in n. 4 above; it simply removes the two difficulties caused by taking αἴσιμα as referring specifically to Agamemnon's speech: the implication that Menelaos' intention to spare Adrastos is somehow not αἴσιμα, and the impression that the narrator is making a positive evaluative comment in relation to a questionable course of action.

Two points, closely related, follow. Shortly after this passage, in Book 7, Menelaos and Agamemnon again disagree about the correct course of action (Il. 7.92–121). In this case, Menelaos takes it upon himself to stand up against Hektor, rebuking the other Akhaians for their cowardice. Agamemnon pulls him up short by pointing out that Menelaos, no match for Hektor, is walking into certain death. The elder brother prevails again:

ὥς εἰπὼν παρέπεισεν ἀδελφειοῦ φρένας ἥρωος
αἴσιμα παρειπών (Il. 7.120–1)

With these words the hero persuaded his brother’s mind, talking him round as to what was appropriate.

First, whereas here too the phrase αἴσιμα παρειπών is neutral, specifying neither the narrator’s nor either of the characters’ individual understanding of what is αἴσιμα, the main verb of the sentence has been changed: ἔτρεψεν at 6.61 is a more emphatic term than παρέπεισεν at 7.120.¹⁰ This variation does reflect an evaluation by the narrator: the issues at stake in the first episode – supplication and guest-friendship – are more profound than those in the second. To stop someone from accepting the claim of a suppliant is more serious than preventing someone from honourably but misguidedly entering an ill-matched duel. The poet flags this difference in degree with his choice of verb.¹¹ Secondly, the difficulty encountered with 6.62 has led some to assume that the occurrence of the same words at 7.121 is more natural, since here Agamemnon can more easily be described as promoting an appropriate course of action.¹² However, as the preceding discussion has shown, this assumption is based upon a misunderstanding of the phrase αἴσιμα παρειπών. It is more likely that the latter passage was composed with the previous passage in mind, with which it is structurally similar; but whereas the main verb has been toned down in accordance with the less morally charged situation, the participial phrase has been carried on without change.¹³

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10) One might be misled by Kirk’s (n. 4 above) offhand remark on Il. 7.120–1, “the possible toning down of παρέπεισεν to ἔτρεψεν”. In fact, *τρέπω* in the sense of changing a person’s behaviour occurs only three times, all in contexts in which the person so changed might have been expected to act otherwise: Il. 5.676, Athene ‘turns’ Odysseus’ heart so as not to fight Sarpedon; Il. 9.600–1, Phoinix expresses the wish that a δαίμων not ‘turn’ Akhilleus down the path Meleagros took; Od. 19.479, Athene ‘turns’ Penelope’s mind so as not to notice Antikleia and Odysseus’ scar.

11) I suspect that the verb ἔτρεψεν has been chosen here to characterize Agamemnon negatively in this episode. It is perhaps this nuance of the verb that led to the variant παρέπεισεν at 6.61 (cf. n. 13 below, and Graziosi / Haubold [n. 1 above] on Il. 6.61).

12) B. Fenik, *Homer and the Nibelungenlied. Comparative Studies in Epic Style* (Cambridge, MA 1986) 22–7; cf. Kirk (n. 4 above) on Il. 6.61–2; Wilson (n. 2 above) 167.

13) Alternatively, if, by virtue of the parallel at Il. 13.788, the sentence ὥς εἰπὼν παρέπεισεν ἀδελφειοῦ φρένας ἥρωος is viewed as formulaic, ἔτρεψεν at 6.61 would be viewed as a deliberate modification, and 7.120 a reversion to the norm.