

Lynn KOZAK The Iron Heart: Iliadic oath-scenes and the characterisation of Achilles

Scholars have long recognised the language of the *Iliad*'s Achilles as unique both in its content and in its structure, reflecting a personality which is likewise unique among the heroes. So it should come as no surprise that his character construction displays peculiar elements even in something as seemingly formulaic as oath-scenes.

Jasper Griffin, in his "Homeric Words and Speakers" (*JHS* 106 (1986): 36-57), has already noted some of the unique characteristics of Achilles' swearing language, particularly his use of *nai ma* and *ou ma* to begin an oath. While this feature alone speaks volumes about Achilles as a character, signifying his strong language and often emphatic tone, there are many other aspects of Achilles' language and behaviour in oath-scenes that help to flesh out his persona even further.

Achilles only swears three times in the *Iliad*: firstly to reassure Kalchas that no harm will come to him if he reveals the cause of the plague afflicting the Achaians; secondly to tell Agamemnon in no uncertain terms that he and the rest of the Achaians will regret his taking Briseis from him; thirdly to refuse to wash or eat until he has performed funeral rites for Patroklos. All of these oaths contain linguistic hints of the character of Achilles, from the often forceful manner of his speech, to the intensity of his personal relationships, to his unique concern with and insight into the future, both his own and the Achaians'. While the first oath is similar to some other Iliadic oath-scenes (though it also contains elements unique to Achilles), the second oath is the only use of an oath in the *Iliad* that comes across as a threat and includes threat-language, while the third oath is the only oath in the *Iliad* that is an emphatic refusal to act. These rare volunteered oaths bring out the boldness of Achilles' speech, where divine oath and ardent expression become interchangeable.

Achilles' part in scenes where an oath might be expected and *fails* to occur is just as interesting in terms of characterisation and relationships. The first scene where this occurs is when Achilles refuses to take an oath (the only oath-refusal in the *Iliad*) with Hektor before they start single combat, when Hektor asks him to swear that the victor will return the corpse of the defeated to his own people. Achilles' refusal is one of the most memorable speeches in the *Iliad*, and it starkly delineates for us what it means to Achilles that Hektor is so totally his enemy that not even an oath can establish trust between them. The second scene stands in sharp contrast: it is that in which Achilles, with no oath, *promises* Priam that he will hold back the Achaians for the duration of Hektor's funeral. After the extensive oath-treaty scene of Book 3, we would expect something of the same here, but instead we get an intensely personal exchange between the hero and the old man that would suggest that Achilles' respect for the old man has generated a trust that needs no oath to confirm it.