

The Agonistic Exchange of Wealth and Praise in Homeric Greece

Christopher Roberts: Hum 110 - 9/9/09

Argument: In the *Iliad*, the translation of various Greek terms as “gift” promotes misunderstanding, since in English the word carries distinct connotations that do not apply to Homeric Greece. The notion of “agonistic exchange” better describes the basic process, which takes place in a greater system, a prestige economy where the value of each hero is determined in relation to contemporaries and illustrious predecessors. The *Iliad* thus begins with a breakdown of this prestige economy, and this reading views the funeral contests memorializing Patroklos as attempts to address this breakdown by demonstratively performing a just distribution of wealth and praise.

agonistic exchange: an exchange of gifts and services where both solidarity and antagonism are affirmed.

prestige: 1. An illusion; a conjuring trick; a deception, an imposture. 2. Originally: impressive or overawing influence, glamour.

Subsequently: influence or reputation derived from achievements, associations, or character, or (esp.) from past success (OED).

Agalma: treasure;

Geras: prize, reward;

Apoina: a ransom or price paid;

Moina: share, allotment, fate

Doron: gift, offering;

Iliad Quotes

Anticipations of exchange value

A: ... grey-eyed Athene / holding the dear treasured aegis, ageless, immortal, / from whose edges float a hundred all-golden tassels, / each one carefully woven, and each worth a hundred oxen (2.446-9).

B: “See now, you are my guest friend from far in the time of our fathers. / ... [L]et us exchange our armour [...]” / but Zeus the son of Kronos stole away the wits of Glaukos / who exchanged with Diomedes the son of Tydeus armour / of gold for bronze, for nine oxen’s worth the worth of a hundred (6.215-236).

C: “[H]ave mercy upon me. / I am in the place, illustrious, of a suppliant who must be honoured, / [...] on that day you captured me in the strong-laid garden / [...] and sold me / away into sacred Lemnos, and a hundred oxen I fetched you. / My release was ransom three times as great [...]” (21.73-93).

D: At once the son of Peleus set out prizes for the foot-race: / a mixing-bowl of silver, a work of art, which held only / six measures, but for its loveliness it surpassed all others / on earth by far, since skilled Sidonian craftsmen had wrought it / well, and Phoenicians carried it over the misty face of the water / and set it in the harbour, and gave it for a present to Thoas. / Euneos, son of Jason, gave it to the hero Patroklos / to buy Lykaon, Priam’s son, out of slavery, and now / Achilles made it a prize in memory of his companion (23.740-749).

Breakdown of the prestige economy

E: “[H]ow shall the great-hearted Achaians give you a prize now? / There is no great store of things lying about I know of. / But what we took from the cities by storm has been distributed; / it is unbecoming for the people to call back things once given. / No, for the present give the girl back to the god; we Achaians / thrice and four times over will repay you, if ever Zeus gives / into our hands the strong-walled citadel of Troy to be plundered” (1.122-129)

F: “Nor, son of Peleus, think to match your strength with / the king, since never equal with the rest is the portion [*emmore*] of honour / of the sceptred king [*basileus*] to whom Zeus gives magnificence. Even / though you are the stronger man, and the mother who bore you was immortal, / yet is this man greater who is lord over more than you rule” (1.277-282).

G: “But my prize [*geras*]: he who gave it [...] has taken it back again outrageously. / [...] Let him of his own will be damned, since Zeus of the counsels has taken his wits away from him. I hate his gifts [...]; not if he gave me gifts as many as the sand or the dust is, not even so would Agamemnon have his way with my spirit until he had made good to me all this heartrending insolence” (9.367-387).

H: “For as I detest the doorways of Death, I detest that man who / hides one thing in the depths of his heart, and speaks forth another” (9.308).

I: “Poor fool, no longer speak to me of ransom, nor argue it. / So, friend, you die also. Why all this clamour about it? / Patroklos also is dead, who was better by far than you are. / [...] Die on, all [...] / you in flight and I killing you from behind; [...] die all an evil death, till all of you pay for the death of Patroklos and the slaughter of the Achaians” (21.99-134).

Lament of anonymity

J: “[W]hy ask of my generation? / As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. / The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber / burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning. / So one generation of men will grow while another / dies” (6.144-151).

K: “Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard. / We are all held in a single honour, the brave with the weaklings. / A man dies still if he has done nothing, as one who has done much.” (9.308-9.320).

L: ... the women sorrowed around her grieving openly for Patroklos, but for her own sorrows each (19.301-303).

M: “So he spoke, and stirred in the other a passion of grieving / for his own father. ... [T]he two remembered, as Priam sat huddled / at the feet of Achilles and wept close for manslaughtering Hektor / and Achilles wept now for his own father, now again / for Patroklos. The sound of their mourning moved in the house” (24.507-515).

Repairing the Prestige Economy

N: "Do not you make vain their argument [...]. / Thus it was in the old days also [...]. The heroes would take gifts; they would listen, and be persuaded. For I remember this action of old, it is not a new thing, and how it went" (9.522-8).

O: "But since I was deluded and Zeus took my wits away from me, I am willing to make all good and give back gifts in abundance" (19.134-138).

P: "[T]he gifts [*dora*] are yours to give if you wish, and as it is proper, / or to keep with yourself. But now let us remember our joy in warcraft, / immediately" (19.146-150).

Q: "[I]t would be a hard thing / for any Achaian to match his speed. Except for Achilleus." / So he spoke, and glorified the swift-footed Peleion. / And Achilleus gave him an answer for what he said, and spoke to him: / "Antilochos, your good word for me shall not have been spoken / in vain. I shall give you another half-talent of gold in addition" (23.791-6).

Secondary Source Quotes

R: A state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange.[...] Political society exists for the sake of noble actions, and not of mere companionship. (Aristotle, III.1280b30, 1281a3)

S: The act of giving seems to create simultaneously a twofold relationship between giver and receiver. A relationship of *solidarity* because the giver shares what he has, or what he is, with the receiver; and a relationship of *superiority* because the one who receives the gift and accepts it places himself in the debt of the one who has given it. [...] Giving thus seems to establish a difference and an inequality of status between donor and recipient, which can in certain instances become a hierarchy: if this hierarchy already exists, then the gift expresses and legitimizes it (Godelier 12).

T: Homeric society comprises a fluid ranking system in which warriors try to establish status in relation to one another by means of ritualized conflict, either among themselves in public speeches, gift exchanges, and athletic competition, or with the enemy in battle. What is gained and lost in social-symbolic transactions in warrior society is *timē*, honor, which may be understood as a dual notion comprising both prestige goods and status. The *timē*-based fluid ranking system is not uninhibited, however, but is constrained by a relatively fixed-rank system (Wilson 134).

U: [*H]abitus* [...] translates infinitely better than '*habitude*' (habit or custom), the 'exis', the 'acquired ability' and 'faculty' of Aristotle [...]. These 'habits' do not just vary with individuals and their imitations, they vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestige. [...] What takes place is a prestigious imitation. [...] The individual borrows the series of movements which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others. It is precisely this notion of the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorised, tested action vis-à-vis the imitating individual that contains all the social element... [W]e are dealing with *techniques of the body*.... [M]an's first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body (Mauss 81-83)

V: To know oneself one had to know responsive others. Each battle engagement in the Iliad constitutes a kind of personal rite de passage in which each warrior announced his name, lineage, and deeds to the other. This insured that one was not demeaned by contending with a patent inferior, but it also guaranteed that one would know what reputation and honor one appropriated by slaying or, less often, capturing and ransoming the other. [...] What links [the Homeric] epics together is agonistic exchange, which works out discrepancies between the "inner" individual and the socially recognized "outer" person. These struggles determine whether a protagonist's estimation of himself, of his respect, is commensurate with that held by others. Homeric Greeks were likely to overestimate their *aidos*. To sustain a high vision of oneself, one must be able to compel others to accept this view. These heroes' reputations are never free from jeopardy so long as they live. [...] One continues to assert new claims until brought short, if not by another mortal hero, then by old age or by a god (Beidelman, 232, 249).

W: The original sense of [ostracism] is not that of a vent, rather that of a means of stimulation: one removes the over-towering individual, thereby now again the contest of forces awakes: a thought that is hostile to the "exclusivity" of genius in the modern sense, but which assumes that, in a natural order of things, there are always *more* geniuses who reciprocally incite [each other] to deeds, as they also reciprocally hold [each other] within the borders of measure. That is the kernel of the Hellenic contest-idea: it abhors solitary mastery and fears its dangers; it requires, as a *means of protection* against the genius - a second genius (Nietzsche 88).

Secondary Bibliography

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